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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**P**ossibly you have noticed that we try to make the pages of AHMM as open to variety within the mystery field as we can. It seems to us that most people like all sorts of stories, and appreciate the change from one writer's "voice" to another's.

This issue of the magazine is a pretty good example. Before you are halfway through, for instance, you will have encountered the gritty (but humor-touched) reality of a highway rest stop, a cave containing magical things, a big city murder with an especially confusing angle (also humor-touched), and a cluster of iron-clad individualists in the Sierrita foothills. You will have been from coast to coast, have shifted into a medieval other-world, and have been accompa-

nied by a private eye, a cop, a minstrel (female), and someone in search of a little peace and quiet (like you and me) and not getting it (like you and me).

You will then enter the fictional Kingdom of Luong, where Superintendent Kiet keeps colleagues, prince, and some corrupt coinhabitants from getting out of hand. Kiet bears with them all, and makes Southeast Asia somehow scrutable, even downright homey.

Off again, to America, and a young woman involved with pets, aerobics, the men in her life, her answering machine, and herself. Then South Africa and a puzzle concerning an inheritance, a man and a woman, a farm.

And finally, a ghost story with a happy ending. *That's* a bit of variety in itself.

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FICTION

# Rest Stop

by Jeremiah Healy

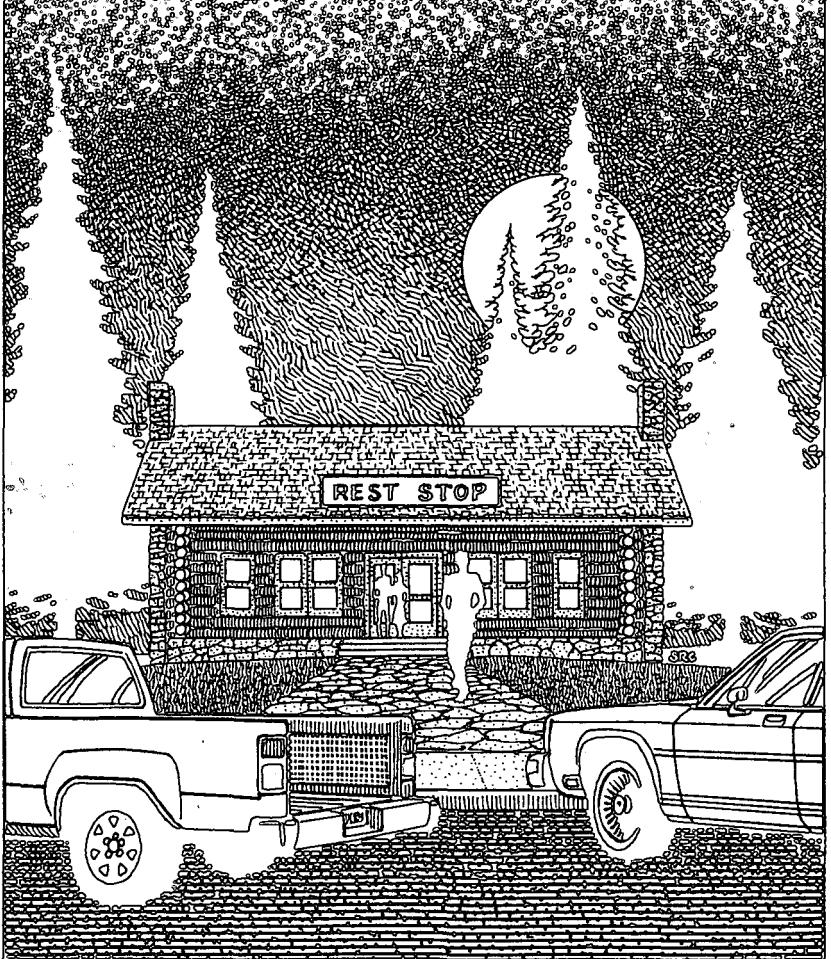


Illustration by Steve Chalker

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**S**taring through the glass windows of the vending machine, I tried to decide what to buy with my last four quarters. I was torn between a single slice of soggy pound cake and a cellophane package of oatmeal cookies that looked two days older than dirt.

I took a sip of the hot chocolate I'd gotten from another machine, mainly for the caffeine. It already had been a long December drive from New York City, and I was only halfway back to Boston. The president of a small company in my office building had hired me for a simple courier trip, the woman liking the cachet of having a private investigator run something too important to fax. It was an easy way to make my daily rate, but I was already so sleepy coming through Connecticut at nine P.M. that I didn't want to risk nodding off at the wheel of the old Prelude.

So I'd pulled into the rest stop.

There was an eclectic collection of vehicles in the angled parking slots near the flagstone path to the hokey cabin. One was a '78 Chevy with a busted taillight and some people in it drinking coffee from a thermos. Another was a Mitsubishi pickup truck sporting a sullen hound dog tied to a toolbox but

no tailgate and only a wired-on bumper. At the other end of the scale we had two entries. The nearer was a Cadillac El Dorado coupe, the spare nestled in an extension of the trunk. At the back of the lot, a Toyota sports car hunkered down, looking as though it had been melded in a wind tunnel.

Sensing kinship, I parked my Prelude between the Chevy and the pickup.

Inside the little lobby of the cabin, a guy in work boots and dirt-caked bluejeans passed me as I moved toward the hot drinks machine. Just in front of the restrooms was a cut out counter, a black man maybe sixty years old sitting in a high chair behind it, his nose buried in a copy of *Ring* magazine.

My hand was hovering over the button for the cookies when a voice from behind the counter said, "I'd go for the pound cake myself."

I looked over at him. He'd lowered the magazine, and I could see that the nose was crooked, a couple of swipe lines of scar tissue through the eyebrows. His hair had thinned like water eroding a midstream island, but he kept it short enough that you wouldn't notice but for an overhead fluorescent.

He said, "Those cookies, they a bit past their prime."



"Thanks." I hit the cake button and retrieved my prize from the bottom bin of the machine. As I moved over to the counter, an elderly woman met her husband outside the men's room and they walked by me.

I extended my hand to the man in the high chair. "John Cuddy."

"Elvin Tyson."

We shook. Closing on his hand was like gripping a bag of wood chips.

I nodded to the magazine. "Any relation to Mike?"

"I wished."

I took a little more hot chocolate. "What was your weight class?"

"Light heavy. Had the legs but not the punch. Got to have the punch for light heavy. You never boxed."

"No."

"Always tell from the hands, you know."

A yuppie couple came past, barely glancing at us. They were dressed like L. L. Bean mannequins and split for the restrooms.

Tyson said, "You from Boston, right?"

"Good ear."

"This job, you get so's you can hear it. Only been there once myself, but give me three Bostons over one New York, I got to listen to them try to repeat directions I give them. You

ever see Marvin Hagler when he was fighting?"

"Just TV."

"Oh, man, you missed something then. Marvin, he the reason I went up to Boston that time. Hynes Auditorium, musta been fifteen years ago, before he got famous and all. He was fighting Willy the Worm Monroe. Remember him?"

"Uh-uh."

"Willy, he from Philly. I was setting up in the balcony with these brothers from down there, and they telling me how the Worm put Marvin away like a year before, only one to do it ever. Only I knowed that Marvin, he had the flu bug when he fought Willy that first time, so I figured the Worm had a date with the robin, you know?"

I laughed, and so did Tyson. The L. L. Bean pair left their restrooms at exactly the same moment and walked out, hand in hand and no doubt still on schedule.

"But first five rounds, Willy, he *owned* Marvin. I mean the Worm come in at like six one and still made his weight, maybe one fifty-five, you know he got a reach like a cherry-picker. But Marvin, he a solid boy, chest and arms like a man your size, and he kept bearing in and burying these body

punches. Also, Marvin, he a lefty, and that always keep you off balance some."

A couple in their late twenties came through, stylishly turned out in ski parkas. The man led a boy maybe three years old in a matching parka. The man and the woman exchanged brief comments in Spanish before he went with the boy into the men's and she used the other door.

Tyson said, "Then the fifth and sixth, Marvin, he started gaining ground. You could see Willy wasn't breathing just right no more, all the punishment he took to the midsection, but the Worm still kept Marvin off a bit."

"With his reach."

"That's right."

A trio came in, all fairly short and dark, not saying anything to each other. The two men were dressed in jeans and army field jackets, the woman in jeans and a cloth coat. One of the men had a scraggly goatee and sized me up as they went by. The other man and the woman looked a little nervous as they divided at the doors.

"The seventh and eighth, now, Marvin, he really come on. Pounding and boring, driving Willy around the ring. The Worm, he rallied some in the ninth and tenth, but Marvin still won those, which give

them five rounds apiece on anybody's card."

The short woman came out of the restroom and moved quickly back toward the cabin door. Then the two short men came out, the clean-shaven one seeming shaky, the goatee not looking at me but walking fast enough to pass his friend. There was only one problem.

The clean-shaven guy was carrying the little boy in the ski parka, hefting him in both arms like a heavy bag of groceries. The boy seemed to be asleep, but I didn't see either of the two people I'd assumed were his parents.

Tyson said, "Then come the eleventh—"

I started toward the men's room. "Elvin, see which car they get into."

"What?"

"See which car the guy with the kid gets into."

"But I ain't finished my story yet."

I was already through the washroom door, thinking my Smith & Wesson Chief's Special was locked in my trunk because I'm not licensed outside Massachusetts. The place was quiet and clean, but not spotless. There was a pool of red expanding from under one of the stalls.

I got to it and pulled open the door. Even if he spoke English,

he couldn't have heard me. The knife was still sticking out from under his breastplate, the eyes out of sync, like each was intent on a different point of the compass.

I came out, Tyson not behind his counter. Barging into the women's room, I saw the dead man's companion on the floor at the sink. The contents of her handbag were scattered over the tiles, but no blood joined them. The pulse was steady at her neck, a strong whiff of something like chloroform coming off her face.

I ran back through the lobby and out the cabin door.

Tyson was standing at the end of the flagstone path, hugging himself and stamping his feet against the cold. When he heard me running, he turned and said, "What do you want to know their car for?"

I got my keys out as I hit the Prelude. "Which one was it?"

"Old Chevy. The man without the boy got in this Mercedes."

I turned the key in the ignition. "Colors?"

"Couldn't say on the Chevy. Mercedes was yellow."

"Plates?"

"Plates?"

"License plate on the Chevy?"

"Don't know. What the hell—"

"Call the state police. Have them check the next five exits north. Then check on the woman in the bathroom and call an ambulance."

"What the—"

But I was already hitting forty on the ramp back to the interstate.

It took me two miles to get them in sight. I figured rightly that they'd stick to fifty-five, while the Prelude's speedometer was flirting with eighty. I eased off when I picked up the Chevy's broken taillight. It was like following a firefly.

They went only two exits, then turned off. I lost the Mercedes at the traffic signal for a crossroad, but I stayed with the Chevy easily enough for six or seven wandering miles. Our route got increasingly urban until we were going through the center of an old mill town, wooden three-deckers perched on a hillside over the main drag.

The Chevy wound up a steep street, and I dropped back a little. When I topped the crest and rounded a curve, I saw the broken light just disappearing into a narrow driveway between two rows of houses. I pulled past, slowly. The clean-shaven man was getting out of the driver's side, the woman now



carrying the boy toward a house.

I edged into a parking space and killed the engine. I thought I'd wait to be sure they were staying, then find a phone.

After a minute, the Prelude's windshield and rear windows fogged up, probably from my breathing and body heat. When it got to the side window as well, I rolled it down rather than start the engine for the defroster.

I had just put my arm on the sill when a muzzle nudged my left ear. A voice veneered with a Spanish accent said, "Thought you smelled like cop."

**"P**ri-va-te in-ves-ti-ga-tor, eh?"

The one with the goatee took a swig from the jug of wine and passed my identification holder to the clean-shaven one, who didn't look any less nervous. We were on the first floor of the three-decker. Goatee was sprawled in a gut-sprung easy chair under a badly framed seascape, the Saturday Night Special he'd poked in my ear lazing in his lap. Nervous was squatting next to the chair. I was sitting on the floor Indian-style in front of them, my hands tied tightly behind me, my feet tied a foot apart with the same stout

rope. When Goatee wasn't talking, I could hear the woman in another room, speaking quietly to the child in Spanish.

Nervous mouthed the words on my I.D. while Goatee said, "I spot your tail when we come off the interstate. You suck when it come to following people."

"I wasn't following you. I was following them."

Nervous looked at Goatee. "Cristo, the man is a detective, he will—"

With some crispness, Goatee backhanded him across the cheek. "José, how many..." Then Goatee laughed and in Spanish said something soothing to Nervous. Goatee gargled some more wine before turning his head to me. "You *habla español*, Mr. P.I.?"

"No."

"Well, maybe you lying to me, but I take your word for it. I hit my cousin here because he say my name in front of you, but then I use his name, so I apologize for it. We all under the pressure, no?"

"This is your first kidnapping."

"You could say that, yeah."

"But not your first killing."

Something moved inside José, who gave Cristo back my I.D., then rubbed his stomach a little with his other hand.

Cristo just smiled, drained

more of the jug. "Let me guess. You see the knife we leave in the rich boy, you figure we real bad dudes, eh?"

"It was probably smarter to leave the knife than carry it away, but it was pretty stupid to kill the man when you had chloroform to start with."

"You got a good nose, Mr. P.I. I got a good nose, too." Cristo pointed to it. "I see you at the rest stop, I say to myself, Cristo, this one is cop. Maybe not now, but sometime."

"You saw me on the way in."

Cristo looked a little puzzled. "So?"

"So you thought I was a cop, that's all the more reason you don't kill the man in the bathroom."

At that point, the woman walked into the room. She was just this side of pretty, with a white blouse and jeans, a tiny gold crucifix on a delicate chain around her neck. Cristo muttered something to her in Spanish with a questioning lilt at the end of it. José spoke up petulantly, but she answered Cristo.

The goatee swung back in my direction. "My cousin is a little angry with me, I call his wife a bad name. Luna, this is Mr. P.I."

The woman looked at me, maybe trying to picture my last name in letters.

I said, "How's the boy?"

Luna didn't hesitate. "He's fine."

"Did he see your relatives here stab his father to death?"

José flinched, Cristo not noticing through his wine laugh as he set down the jug and picked up the gun. The cylinder looked like it held six rounds and would explode before you got past three, but I didn't expect to still be counting that far.

Cristo wagged the business end of the barrel at me. "Mr. P.I., you trying to start my people here against me?"

"Why'd you have to kill him, Cristo?"

The muzzle wavered as he shrugged and went back for the wine with his free hand. "Man recognized me."

"From where?"

Cristo considered that, then shrugged again and took a few more swallows. "I working in this nursing home, bunch of old guys with more money than time to spend it. One old one in particular, he got lots of money. Rooms, whole houses of money. He has his son and the son's wife from the rest stop come visit him, bring the old one's grandson. They rich, too, but they come because they want to get richer. They play up to the old one, they bring him stuff he don't need and can't use. They

bring the kid to scream around the room, make a mess and noise the old one would yell at he not so sick he can't move. Then they start to run low on small talk, they tell the old one about this rest stop they use, every time on the way home from visiting him. They go on and on about what it look like and what they can get the little monster there and I hear them one day and I say to myself, hey, that's the rest stop around where my cousin José and his Luna live. So I wait till the rich boy go out for a smoke, out on the patio, and it's cold but I go out there anyway. I try to be a human being, and I say to him, 'Hey, that rest stop. That's by where my cousin José live.' And this rich boy, he look at me like I am something the pooper-scooper clean up, and he crush his smoke under his shoe and go back in without he even answer me."

"And that's where you got the idea to take his child."

"Not so much his child as the old one's grandson, eh?"

"For ransom."

"For maybe one of the grandfather's houses of money."

"And to kill his son."

Some more wine, eyes to the ceiling. "He recognize me, man. No choice."

José was watching Cristo, Luna was watching me.

I said, "You were going to kill the man from word one, Cristo. The plan was to take the child in the men's room. Mirrors everywhere. The man's going to see you."

Now José started watching me, Luna on Cristo.

"The man's going to see you and remember you after he wakes up from the chloroform. You can't let him remember about that and your cousin José who lives near the rest stop."

Cristo picked up the gun, both the others watching him. "Time to shut up, man."

I played my last cards. "And you're going to have to kill me now because I know and the child because he might remember you, too."

I don't know where José and Luna were looking after that because Cristo came out of the chair in a half-dive and cracked me across the face with the butt end of his popgun. I didn't think the handle grips broke, but I wasn't so sure about my jaw.

**I** ran my tongue around the inside of my mouth and under the gag. One molar was still a plateau, but the one next to it had become a jagged peak.

Lying on my side on the cold floor of a back bedroom, I was a foot away and twice that down from the little boy, sleeping



peacefully on an old iron twin bed. Luna had tucked him carefully under a blanket, but his breath came out in little streams of gray, sweet as an after-dinner mint.

I rocked around on my rear end until I could roll over, my ankles and feet all pins and needles from the tighter bonds. There was a low, wide window that seemed to face onto the driveway because I could just see the top of the Chevy.

I figured they'd keep me alive as long as they could, since it would make my body less smelly and therefore more convenient to carry and dump somewhere. I was looking around from radiator to closet door for a sharp enough edge to work on my ropes when the room door opened.

Luna put her index finger to her lips and closed the door silently behind her. She first walked to the bed, stepping over me to check on the child. Then she stepped back over me, kneeling next to my head and leaning down close to my ear.

"If I cut the ropes, you will take the boy and not hurt my husband?"

I nodded.

She produced a knife from her back pocket and had the hand ropes loose in ten seconds, the feet taking a little less. I got the gag out, but when I tried to

stand, my legs were shaky from lack of circulation. Luna gathered up the boy, who rubbed his eyes and fussed a little, but quietly. I got to the window and tried to ease it up. No go. I checked for the lock, but there was none. I tried again, got a squeak within half an inch and stopped.

The boy seemed to rise to the squeak and cried out.

Luna hissed at me and tried to shush him.

I heard something from the front of the house and just heaved up on the window, which shuddered and screeched. The boy began to howl, and I turned back to Luna. She said, "Quick! Out the window and I will hand him to you."

I got out the window, but given the trussing and the darkness, I twisted an ankle hitting the ground. It took me time to get back up and turn toward Luna.

The light that precedes a swung-open door silhouetted her from behind. She said, "Catch him!" Luna dropped the wailing child from three feet above me. I caught him like a punted football and reached up a hand to steady her.

From inside the room came a yell from Cristo and the sound of hands clapping twice. An exit wound bloomed on the cen-

ter of Luna's chest, just below the crucifix. Her mouth formed an "O," a choir member holding her note. Then she sagged forward from the waist, torso and arms dangling outside the window.

I heard cursing in Spanish and an anguished male cry as I turned to run from the house. I'd gotten three steps on the bum ankle when a commanding male voice roared, "Green light! Green light!"

I cradled the boy and hit the deck. Portable floodlights crisscrossed all around as the air filled with the pocking noises of M-16's in front of me and the splintering noises of wood and glass behind me.

I was sitting on a hard wooden bench outside the detective bureau in a municipal police headquarters that every force in the state had commandeered. A sniper from the SWAT team brought me coffee, and I thanked him for the thought, but even if I drank the stuff, I was still too wired to enjoy it.

An EMT had taped my ankle and said I might want to have it looked at back in Boston. I was just about calm enough to see if it still hurt to lift my foot when the detective bureau door opened and Elvin Tyson came out.

He saw me, started toward the bench, then stepped back and closed the door. He made his way toward me again, taking stock from head to toe.

"Elvin."

"They said you wasn't too bad banged up. Glad to see you."

"Same here. You got the cops?"

"I did. Standing back there at my rest stop, freezing in that night air, I realized I didn't care too much for you hollering at me about missing that old Chevy's license plate."

"Sorry."

"So I did the next best thing."

"Which was?"

"I made sure I saw yours."

I closed my eyes and rested my head on the back of the bench. "They swept the streets of towns just off the exits and found my car."

"Took them a while, though."

"It did, but you were still my best chance. Thanks."

"Hell, I didn't do it for you, son."

I opened my eyes and looked at him. "For the child, then?"

"Hell, no. I just hadn't finished with my story."

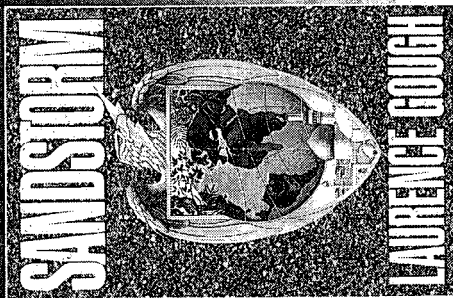
"Your story."

"Yeah. Like I was telling you, through the tenth, Marvin and the Worm, they was even-steven. But then come the eleventh..."

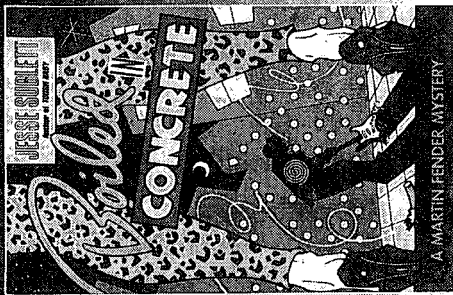
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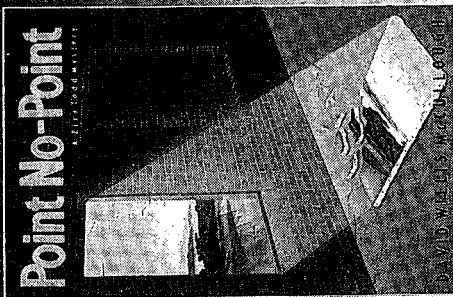
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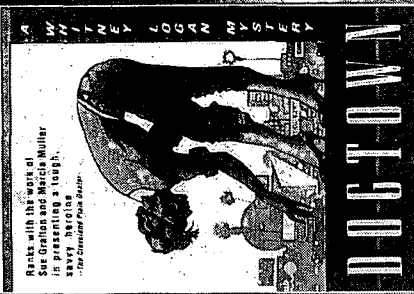
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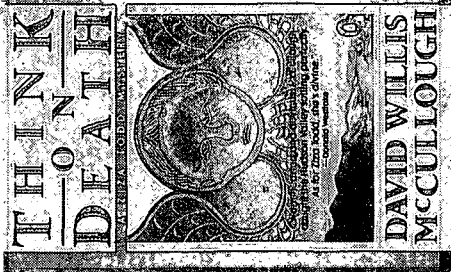
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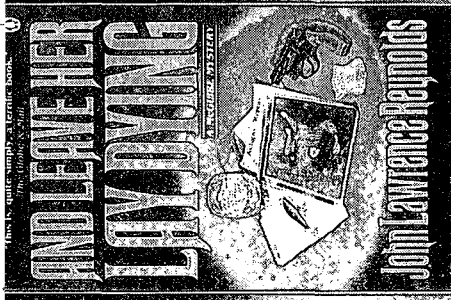
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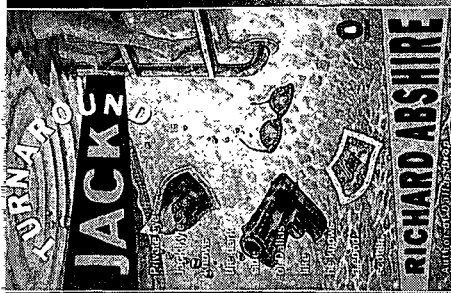
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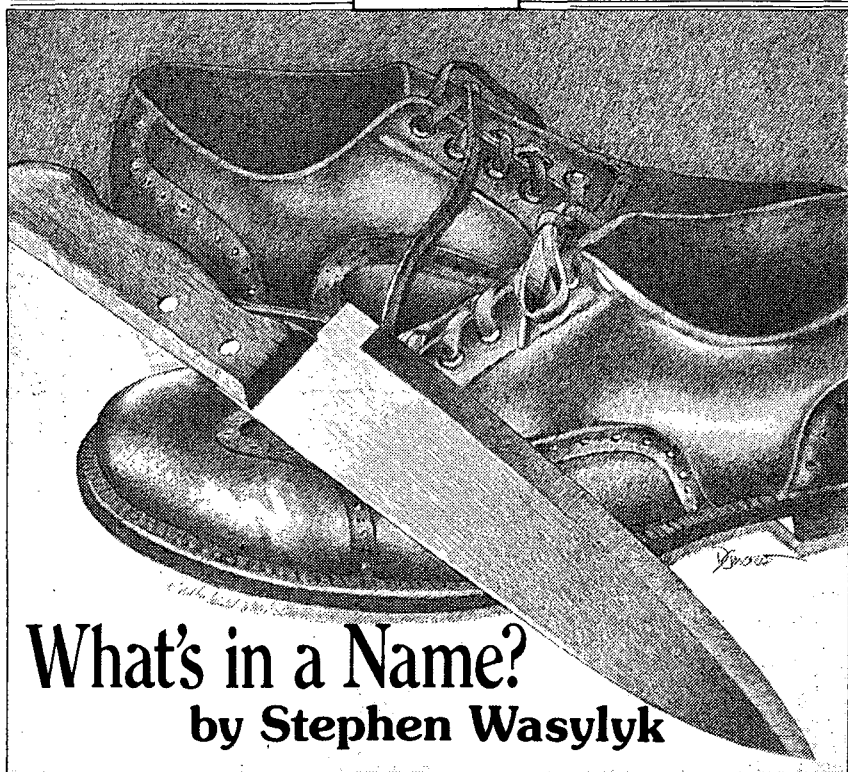


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# What's in a Name?

by Stephen Wasylyk

**T**he man running up the stairwell of the apartment building was tall, rosy with muscle, in his mid-forties, and had lost the crown of his thin, sandy hair. Beneath the pink patch of scalp, one part of his mind concentrated on his footwork, the other on the book he was writing: *High Rise Your Way to Health*. He expected it to be a bestseller, even though its benefits would be limited to dwellers of apartment houses and condominiums soaring

skyward in the cities of America.

His dream might come true. Not since Ponce de Leon had rambled around the Everglades, seeking the Fountain of Youth and finding nothing but giant alligators, had the pursuit of eternal life so occupied the masses.

Old Ponce would have been chagrined to learn the Fountain of Youth wasn't in Florida at all, as thousands upon thousands of geriatric citizens who

had fled there could testify. At the moment, it could be found in any bookstore, generously shared with a trusting public by many creative medicos, dietitians, and exercise gurus for only five ninety-five in paperback, your choice dependent on which seemed to offer the easiest road.

No need now to jog along the streets or in the park at the mercy of muggers; no weather to contend with, or inhaling of carcinogens, masked by traffic fumes. Simply run up the steps to get your heart pumping and your respiration up to healthful levels. The sheer genius of his idea had staggered him.

What thrusting your entire body weight upward from the balls of your feet time after time would do to the delicate assembly and balance of the human foot and ankle, Rocky Balboa notwithstanding, he neither considered nor worried about.

No matter how well the jogging shoes had been constructed by diligent, quality-conscious Koreans or Italians, the straps of muscles, piano-wire thin ligaments, and tough tendons that held the twenty-six bones together would be stretched and strained, to the delight and the revenue of practitioners of sports medicine, the hottest growth indus-

try in the country.

Eyes down, his initial glimpse of the man descending one of the flights between the second and third floors was of highly polished black wingtips and the lower half of sharply creased, cuffless, dark gray pin-stripe worsted trousers. To note more, he would have to lift his eyes from the steps before him, not only more hazardous to his health than breathing carbon monoxide from the traffic outside, but he wouldn't have to wait twenty years for the damage to be assessed.

He did, however, garner brief additional details as he turned at the landing. The man was also wearing a tweed jacket with elbow patches and a tweed walking cap, neither of which went with the dark grey worsted trousers and polished wingtips at all.

He reached the fifth floor and jogged to the elevator in his designer shoes, designer socks, designer jock strap, designer shorts, and designer T-shirt, lacking only the designer headpiece he wore to the office. No question about it. Some people had no fashion sense at all.

He entered the elevator and fingered the button for the lobby, feet pumping as if to stop was to die.

While he ran *up* the steps, he'd learned the hard way that

running *down* required the concentration of a chess master, the foot and eye coordination of a wide receiver, and the precision of a ballet dancer. Otherwise, one slip in a stairwell constructed of unyielding concrete with metal edged steps could instantly fatten the financial portfolios of your primary orthopedic surgeon and his consultants. Not to mention an occasional brain specialist.

He'd have the warning set in large, bold italics. Even a pocket-picking, fee-splitting, contingency-fee-grabbing, word-twisting attorney like his slimy brother-in-law wouldn't dare fake a tumble and sue in the face of such a prominent disclaimer.

Approximately two hours later and ninety miles to the south, the young man behind the newsstand in the cavernous lobby of the 30th Street station in Philadelphia put aside his textbook and looked up as arriving passengers stepped off the escalator from the train platform below. He glanced at the board. Nine twenty from New York, right on time.

Clutching suitcases, attaché cases, duffel bags, paper sacks, and sometimes each other, they spilled out onto the marble floor. Not knowing where to go next or seeking the asylum of a

friendly face, some paused and looked around, to be jostled and almost run down by those who knew exactly where they were going and were in a hurry to get there.

The young man's eyes swept the moving figures like radar, isolating the young and female, one benefit conferred by manning the stand during the evening hours. Less important were an income to help defray his expenses at Penn and enough dead time to allow him to study.

Nothing interesting, which was why the eyes settled on the man who strode by, moving fast.

Train travelers as a whole never tried to qualify for the Best Dressed list. Most seemed to be aiming for Scruffiest in the World, but there were outré costumes and outré costumes. The teenaged girl wearing red, yellow, and green striped calf-length trousers, a purple flowered blouse, a battered brim-turned-up fedora she'd undoubtedly stolen from a homeless person, and hi-top sneakers trailing untied laces like broken shackles could be considered representative and not worthy of note. But a middle-aged man with heavy eyebrows, a straight nose, and a trim black mustache, wearing polished wingtips, dark gray



sharply creased worsted trousers, a white button-down-collar shirt with rep tie, with elbow patched tweed coat and a tweed cap—now, that was an unusual combination for any traveler indeed.

A clashing unusual enough to make the young man smile as he recalled a grandmother who wouldn't leave the house without her white gloves and a grandfather who insisted that you dressed appropriately or remained at home behind drawn blinds. Gramps would have considered the combination not only tasteless, but suitable only for walking the dog on a moonless night after the neighbors were asleep. And then only in a canine emergency.

His mother had become a bit more daring than his grandmother, having actually once appeared at the supermarket in a lime green leotard, but his father still subscribed to the same dress code.

One evening, when severely lectured by his father for leaving the house wearing a sport coat over a T-shirt, teenage rebellion against something he didn't understand had flared. He wondered out loud if burying the old man in a sweatshirt and jeans would deny him entrance into heaven.

He watched the figure stride

swiftly toward the doorway that led to the Market Street El. If the coat had matched the trousers, the man would have taken a cab, he thought. His heritage had come to the fore—what you wore established patterns of behavior. White collar thieves stole with dignity, for instance. Those who wore tank tops mugged their victims.

**L**ieutenant Polansky looked down at the sprawled figure on the kitchen floor of the apartment. The man had been perhaps forty, hair at the temples barely touched with gray, heavy eyebrows still black, nose straight above a small clipped mustache. He was wearing tan slacks, scruffy brown loafers, and a red plaid, shortsleeved cotton shirt with a button-down collar.

"Dead, huh?" said Polansky.

His incisive and well considered comments had long ago led to vehement denials of responsibility for his mental abilities by the four ethnic groups involved in his heritage—Italian, Irish, Hungarian, and Polish—the consensus being that in him the melting pot that was America had somehow gone astray like a stew with one ingredient too many.

"The M.E. thinks that if he

wasn't he'd take that knife out of his chest and sit up," said Ganz.

Polansky glared at him. "So watcha been doin' so far?"

"Nothing much. Just got here five minutes ago."

Polansky studied his watch, wrestling with the calculation. "Well, get goin'. The way you guys operate, the guy who killed him will die of old age before you catch him."

He stalked out.

The men in the room grinned at Ganz sympathetically.

The M.E. guessed he'd been killed about eight the previous evening, give or take, the weapon an ordinary kitchen carving knife, one of a set in a still-open drawer. How it had ended up in the man's chest wasn't clear at all. No sign of a struggle, the whole apartment as neat as if the refugee Latina lady who did the cleaning had just departed. No sign that anything had been removed, either, or that entry had been forced. No cups or glasses to show he'd been entertaining someone. No robbery. The Rolex still glistened on his wrist, and his wallet held credit cards and about ninety dollars in cash. It also informed Ganz that his name was Rudolph Mullen and to notify Augustus Donderhoe in case of emergency.

Mullen had been found because he and the across-the-hall neighbor worked in the same building and had ridden to work together on the subway for years, more as a matter of mutual protection than friendship. The neighbor had been puzzled when he'd received no response to his knocking that morning. Nothing had been said the previous day about not going in. Mullen was very meticulous about things like that. Very considerate. The neighbor had been disturbed enough to call the police.

Ganz toured the apartment.

Rudolph Mullen was not only meticulous and considerate, he led a very ascetic life. The apartment could have been a monk's. Nothing could have been removed without leaving a gaping hole. A bed to sleep in, chairs to sit on, a desk to work at, a table for dining. Bookcase with classical literature. One small TV set and one small radio. No paintings—good, bad, or on black velvet—adorned the walls. Not one gewgaw, gimcrack, souvenir, or memento. No framed photos.

The closets yielded conservative and tailor-made clothing, the cost of one suit more than Ganz had spent on the last five. The shoes carried the hand-crafted mark of a London boot-maker, the shirts that of an ex-



clusive shop. The underwear and socks didn't, but the quality said they were the next thing to it.

The only things personal in the desk were the bills everyone accumulates simply by existing. Somewhere a safe deposit box held the treasures near and dear to Rudolph.

All Ganz found that exhibited the personal touch was an address book. He slipped it into his pocket.

He'd be working alone until Arroyo joined him either late that afternoon or in the morning, depending on when the prosecutor put him on the stand. Prosecutors liked Arroyo. Defense attorneys didn't. When someone who resembles Lorenzo Lamas testifies as the arresting officer, jurywomen's attention is riveted on the witness chair, contrary to the Defense Attorney's Creed, which calls for diverting their attention to how wholesome and innocent the well-scrubbed defendant has been made to appear. Jurywomen also never questioned Arroyo's testimony. Surely if a man who resembled Lorenzo Lamas arrested a person, the person had to be guilty. Even female defendants had been known to smile fondly at him as his baritone clanged prison doors closed behind them.

The technicians told Ganz he'd have results in the morning, a battered and timeworn lie spoken for the sake of pleasant social interaction. He sealed the apartment and talked to the neighbor across the hall, who had been so shaken by the loss of his subway traveling companion he'd decided to take the day off and perhaps play golf that afternoon to settle his shattered nerves.

Rudolph Mullen, he said, had been an investment counselor, quiet and dignified and straitlaced, a demeanor essential for advising widows to invest in securities that lost twenty points the next day. Rare occasions found him cheerful and voluble and even witty, leading the neighbor to speculate whether Rudolph was a closet schizophrenic.

No relatives that he knew of other than a brother named Randolph about whom the deceased said little. The brother lived elsewhere.

That explained why the person to be notified was Augustus Donderhoe.

Since procedure demanded a personal identification be made as soon as possible, Ganz called the number given for Augustus Donderhoe. A female voice enunciated *The Law Offices of Augustus Donderhoe* so smugly

and formally that Ganz was certain the Supreme Court called in Mr. Donderhoe when wrestling with a knotty Constitutional problem.

Mr. Donderhoe took the death of his client with the equanimity of a professional who'd heard it all, and agreed to meet Ganz at the morgue.

One look convinced Ganz that upon his own death, Mr. Donderhoe would be stuffed and mounted and placed in the foyer of his alma mater's law building as an example of how the trusted elderly family retainer should look, from the lemonine white mane and the scrubbed, glowing skin of the bony face to the polished shoes. On *L.A. Law*, he would have lent dignity to every episode.

Ganz kept his hand on his wallet, which was no reflection on Mr. Donderhoe but an automatic personal reaction triggered when within five feet of any bearer of a law degree.

Looking down at the white face and the clipped mustache, Mr. Donderhoe said it could indeed be Rudolph Mullen. On the other hand, it could well be Randolph Mullen, his identical twin. Even their parents had never been capable of telling one from the other.

Personally, Mr. Donderhoe would vote for its being Ru-

dolph, even though the twins often used the fact that no one could tell one from the other to play jokes on people, which many twins often do but generally outgrow. The Mullens had never given up this juvenile practice. Real comics. If true in this situation, though, it could be considered carrying a joke too far.

Identification shouldn't be a problem, thought Ganz. Rudolph's apartment should yield a plethora of prints to be compared with those of the corpse.

Walking from the morgue, Mr. Donderhoe treated him to an exposition on multiple births that would have glazed the eyes of any jury in the land.

There were monozygotic twins and there were dizygotic twins, said Mr. Donderhoe, monozygotic twins being those resulting from a single fertilized egg, called a zygote, which subsequently divided and produced two human beings of identical genetic makeup. Dizygotic twins, on the other hand, came from two separate eggs fertilized by separate sperm, resulting in different genetic makeups.

Monozygotic twins were very close and possessed identical physical characteristics; indeed, even identical personalities. Occasionally those personalities differed. Why, no one yet

knew with any certainty.

The Mullen twins, continued Mr. Donderhoe, were one of those rare pairs with personality differences. Rudolph had pretty much followed in the footsteps of the Mullen clan—Republican, conservative, clinging to old and tested values, while Randolph had gone haywire and become a college professor, a liberal Democrat. It hadn't affected the brothers' relationship, but Mullen senior wept. No good could come from this betrayal of generations of good taste. When Randolph actually campaigned for George McGovern, he'd cut him out of his will, leaving his money to Rudolph. Randolph, of course, had been angry, although it could have been much worse. His brother was very generous in advancing him sums when he needed assistance.

Punishing a son because he chose tweed instead of worsted didn't seem right to Ganz.

Who would inherit now? A wife not on the scene perhaps?

Neither brother married. Their only falling out was many years ago over the affections of a young woman who had the good sense to marry someone else. Given the brothers' sense of humor, she had never been quite certain which one was in bed with her. Apparently they had never found a

replacement for their affections.

Surprisingly, one of the conditions of Mullen senior's will was that Rudolph was granted only custody of the money, as it were. Should he die before Randolph, then Randolph would inherit, since the old man couldn't picture one of his sons remaining politically confused forever and was certain that someday good breeding would prevail and Randolph would become a respectable member of society and vote straight Republican.

How much money are we talking about here?

At this point, approximately a million.

Millionaires could be found in the oddest places outside the Senate these days, but in that apartment?

You might say that Rudolph wasn't known as a big spender.

Ganz thought back to the suits in the closet. Rudolph hadn't tried to save money when buying clothes, unless one considered that those suits would go in and out of style at least three times before they wore out.

And in remembering the suits, it struck Ganz that the attire of the corpse was more appropriate for a Democrat and a college professor than a Republican and an investment

counselor. Particularly since he'd found no casual clothing in the apartment at all. Rudolph must have worn a tie during all his waking hours. Perhaps the body was Randolph and not Rudolph, unless Rudolph had suddenly suffered a mid-life crisis and would have next purchased a red sports car to go with the loafers and the plaid shirt and driven around picking up impressionable young women, using the universal excuse that he was interested in fine machinery even though everyone knew his interest had nothing to do with pistons and gears but a great deal to do with zero to sixty in eight seconds. But not on a highway.

The million seemed like a nice motive for Randolph, he said.

Mr. Donderhoe smiled. Only if he knew about the provision, which he did not. Mullen senior wanted no false transformations motivated by money.

Ganz picked up the phone and asked that fingerprints be lifted from everything in the apartment that only the tenant would normally touch.

Would Mr. Donderhoe like to call Randolph, even though they couldn't be sure it *was* Randolph, and inform him his brother was dead and ask him to come to New York to make an official identification, or

would he prefer that Ganz do so?

Donderhoe said he'd rather not speak to someone who always called him a societal Neanderthal. He gave Ganz a phone number where Randolph could be reached, which was a university in Philadelphia, of all places.

Wondering if the pleasant-voiced operator would be successful in tracking down Professor Mullen, since he might well be lying in the morgue, Ganz was surprised to hear an irritated masculine voice announce, This is Professor Mullen, implying that if the caller had nothing better to do, the callee did.

Tactfully, Ganz informed the voice that Rudolph Mullen had been killed, and as the only living relative, would Professor Mullen please come to New York to identify the body?

The voice growled that if anyone wished to identify the corpse of Rudolph Mullen, all they had to do was place a dollar bill in its hand and see if the fingers curled around it. As for the voice, it had no intention of coming to New York now or at any time, since it felt that New York City should be cut off somewhere around the Bronx, towed to sea, and sunk, and furthermore, it intended to have a million bumper stickers

printed that said I Hate NY as soon as it found a suitable symbol for hate to replace that stupid heart.

Ganz said he took that to mean the voice did not care much for the cultural center of the Western World, to which the voice replied that while New York could be considered the center for crime, dirt, corruption, greed, drugs, bad manners, and other carefully engineered urban components of modern society, any culture attached to the place would be somewhere on the periphery if it existed at all. Thank you and goodbye.

Ganz hung up and told Mr. Donderhoe of the conversation. If the brothers had been close, why hadn't Randolph been upset? Might Mr. Donderhoe have been mistaken? Could an unnoticed enmity exist?

Mr. Donderhoe shook his head. He was at a loss for an explanation. Didn't sound like Randolph at all. More like Rudolph, if anyone. Randolph must have been putting Ganz on. The brothers never allowed good taste to stand in the way of a joke. Even now, Randolph must be weeping.

Sure, said Ganz. He could hear the sobbing from ninety miles away.

Arroyo had worked his way

down to the fifth floor, turning down seven offers to move in immediately, rent free, for as long as he liked, from five single females, a married one, and one male.

The only thing out of the ordinary he'd come across was an elderly lady who reported seeing a couple of drunken men staggering along the sidewalk singing a spiritual. Not from this building. The black people who lived *here*, she assured him, didn't get drunk and sing spirituals.

Hairpiece quivering with each step and roll of his body, a man using a cane limped toward him.

Had the man noticed anyone on the day of the murder who might not have belonged in the building?

Well, he couldn't say that the man he'd seen in the stairwell didn't belong, but he'd yet to see a resident with the nerve to combine a tweed sport coat and cap with worsted pinstripe trousers and polished wingtips.

What did he look like?

Having been introduced by Ganz to the corpse in the morgue, it seemed to Arroyo that the description was a rather good match, particularly in a case where twins were concerned.

He asked the man why he was limping.

Couldn't understand it, said the man. His foot and ankle had become swollen and painful for no apparent reason.

**G**anz sat on the park bench, chewing on the salami on rye sandwich the delicatessen had condescended to sell him, while several dozen pigeons scurried around his feet cooing things like: what is it with this guy?—don't we even rate a crumb here? So the city's going broke, do *we* have to pay for it?

The bald-headed man in the pinstripe in Mullen's office hadn't been surprised to hear of his violent death. Live wrong, die wrong, you know. Only to be expected when a man misappropriates five hundred thousand dollars from the accounts of several of his clients. Ha. Thought to make a killing for himself with *their* money, but his information had been wrong. Damned fool. There were safer ways, the man hinted.

So Rudolph was facing prosecution?

Not by the firm. The man shuddered at the thought. Bad publicity, you see. Dismissal and banning from the business were far more effective. Yes, indeed. Disgrace. Friends, memberships in clubs gone, family

name besmirched, scorned by fellow alumni.

And his defrauded clients are content with that?

Their losses are covered by the bonding company. Which, of course, had every right to sue Rudolph for the recovery of the money.

So Rudolph might well have ended on the nightly news?

That was a distasteful possibility unless he came up with the half-mil.

Ganz sent the pigeons into a hysterical, milling mass by tossing them the last small bite of sandwich, those frozen out on the fringes taking off in a grim, red-eyed bombing formation to wreak revenge on park pedestrians. Smart bombs had nothing on pissed-off pigeons, their skills perfected over countless generations of practice on noble outdoor sculptures of famous personages.

The apartment had been as monastic as Ganz had said, but Arroyo, being far more familiar with such niceties than Ganz, had noticed the bed had silk sheets, which might be there because Rudolph liked to indulge himself in a bit of luxury now and then, cheap as he was reputed to be, but perhaps for another reason.

The autopsy showed that Rudolph had been quite inebri-



ated, and since there were no alcoholic beverages in the apartment, he would have had to imbibe his snootful elsewhere. Perhaps in the company of a female?

He went back to the across-the-hall neighbor, who had taken another day off because he was still suffering trauma. Preparing for another round of golf to ease the pain of his loss, he was practicing his putting on the rug.

Lady friend? The neighbor missed the glass tumbler he was aiming for by two feet. He was under the impression they were the paid variety. Highly paid. Quite goodlooking and extremely well dressed, the type someone like Rudolph could acquire on the strength of his money rather than his looks and personality. Of course, he'd never been introduced to one, nor had Rudolph ever talked about them.

Arroyo smiled. Female companions of that caliber did not lurk on street corners or in bars. This cultural asset of New York was generally available only through a phone number.

The phone number should be in that address book resting on Ganz's desk. No man entrusted such a valuable asset to memory.

It was listed under Mother

Nature's Helpers, a name he recognized as one with a sterling reputation and an organization the unwary might consider to be somehow connected with the environment. It was, of course, but the environment in its case was limited to the bedroom.

Might one of Mother Nature's Helpers have been assisting Rudolph that night?

No, but the time spent in checking this out was not entirely wasted, since Mother Nature herself smiled at Arroyo and indicated that clients who resembled Lorenzo Lamas were entitled to a ten percent discount.

He and Ganz returned to find the fingerprint people had deposited a bombshell on Ganz's desk. Almost everything in the apartment yielded two sets of prints, one of which matched those of the corpse, the other those on the knife. Impossible to determine which belonged to the occupant.

Ganz considered. If the corpse was Rudolph, how had Randolph traveled from Philadelphia to New York and returned home? Surely even a college professor had too much intelligence to drive, indulged in by cab drivers, police, and delivery people through necessity, and tourists and others through ignorance.

The man had been seen in the stairwell at about eight thirty. A fast walk to the train station would take perhaps a half hour. Was there a train to Philadelphia about nine that evening?

He called Amtrak. Indeed there was. At nine twenty, with stops in Newark, Metropark, and Trenton.

They informed Polansky it was necessary for them to travel to Philadelphia to interview Randolph. To kill two birds with one stone, they'd retrace the route he might have taken, using the same train.

Polansky regarded them suspiciously. "I thought the only trains left were in those backward places. Europe and Japan."

We still have a few. Need an okay for overtime and a voucher for fare.

Ain chu heard? City's broke. No overtime. No voucher. Consider it a pleasure trip and show them your badge.

It doesn't work that way on Amtrak.

What's Amtrak?

Ganz sighed. They'd file for expenses and hope they got the money back before they retired.

The conductor looked at Ganz's badge. Wasn't in the market for any fake I.D. no matter how good it looked. All

he wanted was their tickets.

Would he, in the course of dispensing warmth and cheer while collecting tickets, have happened to notice a passenger wearing a tweed coat and cap with pinstripe worsted trousers and polished shoes two nights ago?

Strange that Ganz should mention it. The guy looked like he couldn't decide whether to head for the office or the skeet range. Staring at Arroyo, he added: no telling what you'll see on a train these days.

Never been on a train before, said Arroyo thoughtfully. Never been a train to where I wanted to go.

Once trains went everywhere, said the conductor, but all that did was create tycoons who became filthy rich by exploiting their employees. That's why trains now only take people to places where no one wants to go, like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington. Understand?

No, said Arroyo.

I didn't think that anyone who resembled Lorenzo Lamas would, said the conductor.

The escalator spewed them into the lobby of the high ceilinged train station, Ganz's eyes casting about for a source of information and seeing nothing but long lines except at the

newspaper stand, where an otherwise intelligent looking young man was drooling all over his merchandise while watching a far-from-anorexic young lady go by, the blouse and tight jeans delightfully emphasizing sugar and spice and everything nice.

We better check in with the cops, said Arroyo.

After we talk to Mr. Bug Eyes, said Ganz.

He informed the kid he was getting his papers all wet.

The kid glanced down. Better the *Inquirer* than my book.

Ganz wouldn't have wanted to lift the book, much less read it. Guess you see all kinds of strange people go by.

Define strange.

A guy wearing a tweed coat with pinstriped worsted pants and polished shoes. Two nights ago.

The kid grinned. Tweed cap, too. Good clothes, man. Tailored right to him, not like they'd come out of a donation bag for the homeless. Looked like he should know better.

Ganz held up his I.D. You may have just won yourself an all-expenses-paid trip to The Big Apple.

All right! said the kid enthusiastically. I Love NY! Throw in a couple of tickets to a Broadway show and you've got a deal.

\* \* \*

At the Roundhouse, which was police headquarters, they were given coffee and asked to wait until an escort was provided, since questioning someone without the authority to do so might screw up any subsequent legal proceeding, in addition to wounding the pride of the local constabulary.

When the escort walked in, Ganz felt that William Penn had descended from his perch atop City Hall, placed an arm around his shoulders, and warmly welcomed him to his City of Brotherly Love, although his pounding pulse had nothing whatsoever to do with brotherly, sisterly, or any other type of love not connected with the kind explicitly described in romantic novels.

She'd appeared in hundreds of paintings by the Italian masters: hair like a raven's wing touched by moonlight, facial bones the heritage of Roman nobility, eyes deep and dark.

Not all females were impressed by a resemblance to Lorenzo Lamas.

The eyes slid over Arroyo and overwhelmed Ganz. Seated beside her as she drove through the deserted streets, the Liberty Bell pealing joyously in the distance, he fingered the timetable in his pocket. Working out a schedule would be no trouble at all.

The apartment of Professor Mullen was on the twentieth floor of a highrise not far from the campus where he taught geopolitics, a course a snide colleague accused him of cleverly converting into a study of geopolitical skulduggery, simply because a few of his brightest students had gone on to positions with congressional investigating committees and from there to additional fame by writing books and appearing on talk shows all over the country as they sought to Wake The Nation Up!

Slurping a can of sugarless, light, no-calorie diet cola, his L. A. Gear clad feet propped on a coffee table, the despondent figure within contemplated the circumstances that had brought him to this point in his life—the death of his monozygotic twin.

Due to a larcenous gene inherited from a sticky-fingered black sheep ancestor, the monozygotic brothers Mullen had both arrived at the top of a cliff labeled *disaster* at the same time, their only salvation a safety net woven of a half million. Each.

Rudolph, facing disenfranchisement and the scorn of his peers, not so much because he'd manipulated his accounts but for being stupid, had to come up

with a half million to keep the bonding company off his back.

Randolph's position was in jeopardy because of a deception recently brought to the attention of the university hierarchy by the aforementioned snide colleague. While some of his students went on to fame and fortune, others were absolutely brain-dead. Under the guise of special tutoring, he'd taken advantage of the situation for years by extorting excessive cash contributions from parents to ensure a passing grade, which was necessary for graduation and a good job with the State Department. Universities being even more tolerant and forgiving than modern parents, restitution would preserve his position.

Not aware of Rudolph's problem, Randolph had run over to New York to beg for money, half of which was rightfully his anyway, where he learned their simultaneous cash requirements had impaled them on the horns of a dilemma.

The family fortune wasn't large enough to save both without reducing them to appearances in Wrigley's Doublemint Gum commercials, whereas if only one was saved, the other could manage decently on the money remaining.

Which should be saved?

While they loaded up on

Glenfiddich and Wild Turkey, words like honor, integrity, and remember the family name passed between them. All lies, of course, since each was thinking only of himself. One postulated that a man must walk in another's shoes to appreciate the magnitude of his disgrace. The suggestion that they trade places again for a few days emerged. Done before, time and again, as a lark—one sitting in for the other in amusing situations, living in each other's apartments, chuckling over the deception.

Why not now for a more serious and worthy purpose—to help them reach a decision?

They had staggered to Rudolph's apartment to exchange clothing, singing *Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows my sorrow*. Quite good, actually. They had always harmonized well.

He'd been graphically illustrating a point—how the loss of status was like a knife to the heart—when the accident happened. How could he have known his inebriated brother would stagger toward him just as he lurched forward and thrust out the knife?

Stunned and horror-stricken, he'd gazed down at the fallen body.

He'd been devastated, feeling as though the knife was lodged

in his own heart. One half of him was gone, more punishment for a monozygotic twin than society could mete out or anyone could understand.

While looking at the body, an alcohol-nurtured thought had stirred. Something along the lines of: a twin couldn't be prosecuted if you couldn't prove which twin he was.

In a daze, he donned the tweed coat and hat and left.

His doorbell rang. One of the neighbors, otherwise the security guard at the door would have announced a caller. He hoped it was the goodlooking blonde down the hall come to solace him in his grief.

He opened the door to see a beautiful, dark-haired woman holding out an identification folder with a badge pinned to it, and behind her two men, one of whom bore an uncanny resemblance to Lorenzo Lamas, the other to a grizzly which had wandered east from Yellowstone.

The grizzly held up a hand and drew the forefinger of the other across the fingertips while beaming at him broadly. Mullen puzzled over the sign language. What was this? Charades? Okay. Fingertips, right? Fingertips, fingertips—no—fingerprints!

His heart fell to his L. A. Gears.

*Fingerprints!* In his daze he'd neglected to remove his from the knife. Never slow mentally, he knew exactly why the bear-like man was beaming at him.

He held the door wide and motioned them inside and, as they passed, leaped into the hall, slammed the door closed behind him, and ran. He found the elevator already gone and fled to the stairwell, not realizing that running down twenty floors of stairs successfully called for the concentration of a chess master, the foot and eye coordination of a wide receiver, and the precision of a ballet dancer, none of which he or his monozygotic twin possessed.

He missed a step at the eighteenth floor, tripped, plunged head first into the wall at the landing, and caromed down the next flight, breathing his last before Ganz, Arroyo, and the Italian beauty caught up to him.

While having dinner with the titian-haired Irish beauty he'd been squiring about for lo these many months, Ganz explained his latest adventure, wisely omitting any reference to the Italian beauty, who had indicated that she would not be averse to any romantic attentions he might have. Her parting smile

had put Mona Lisa to shame, so mysterious, so full of promise, and so breathtaking it made commuting ninety miles in the interest of love, lobster diavolo, and linguini with clam sauce seem like a walk around the block.

The question of who had died in the apartment and who had died in the stairwell was moot in the eyes of the police. The case was closed.

But survivorship had to be established.

If Rudolph had died in the apartment, the money went to Randolph. His will specified that whatever assets he had were to go to worthy causes like the homeless, unwed mothers, drug rehabilitation, save the whales, preserve the environment, thank you for not smoking signs, and many others—so many, Ganz said, that each would receive a pittance, even splitting up Rudolph's million. Like the true Democrat he was, Randolph's desire to help everyone would help no one.

On the other hand, if Randolph had died in the apartment and Rudolph in the stairwell, his will specified that if Randolph had predeceased him, the money was to go to a half-dozen organizations that prided themselves on advancing the ideals that had made this country great. Like the



true Republican he was, Rudolph had left the money to those who already had more than they needed.

To determine the answer, Executor of Both Wills Donderhoe would have to hire a squad of forensic experts.

Enthralled by this web of circumstance, magnificent Lakes of Killarney eyes wide, the Irish beauty breathed, surely *he* knew which Mullen was which?

Ganz grinned evilly at her above his wineglass. Of course. He was looking forward to her inventiveness in torturing the answer from him later.

The eyes flashed as she lifted her plate an inch. Later? How did he think he'd look wearing the saucier's mint flavored creation *now*?

Ganz sighed, wondering if he'd ever be threatened with clam sauce.

Only one brother would have run.

Perfectly formed russet eyebrows arched. Indeed?

If Randolph had killed Rudolph in his monastic apartment, why did he return to Philadelphia? He was in trouble there as well. If he'd known there was a possibility he might inherit Rudolph's million, perhaps. But he didn't know. Better to disappear into

the heartland of America, shave off his mustache, and hope he wasn't identified by a landlady who watched *America's Most Wanted*.

But look at Rudolph's benefits in running. Thinking him dead, the bonding company would swallow its loss. Hoping he could beat the rap, he could fake it as Randolph long enough to inherit his own money, pay off the university, and fade away. When he realized what the fingerprints on the knife really meant, he knew he was finished.

Really meant?

In this situation, it didn't matter which Mullen he was. You know what Shakespeare said about a rose. By any name it would smell as sweet—

By any *other* name.

Don't split hairs. Same principle. A victim by any name would be just as dead. A killer by any name would be just as guilty. No prosecutor would care who was who. A man was dead, and *his* prints were on the weapon. Precise identity wasn't important.

Frightening enough to make anyone run, she said.

Ganz nodded.

Even a monozygotic twin with generations of pinstripes and polished wingtips behind him.

FICTION

# In Deep

by Dan  
Crawford

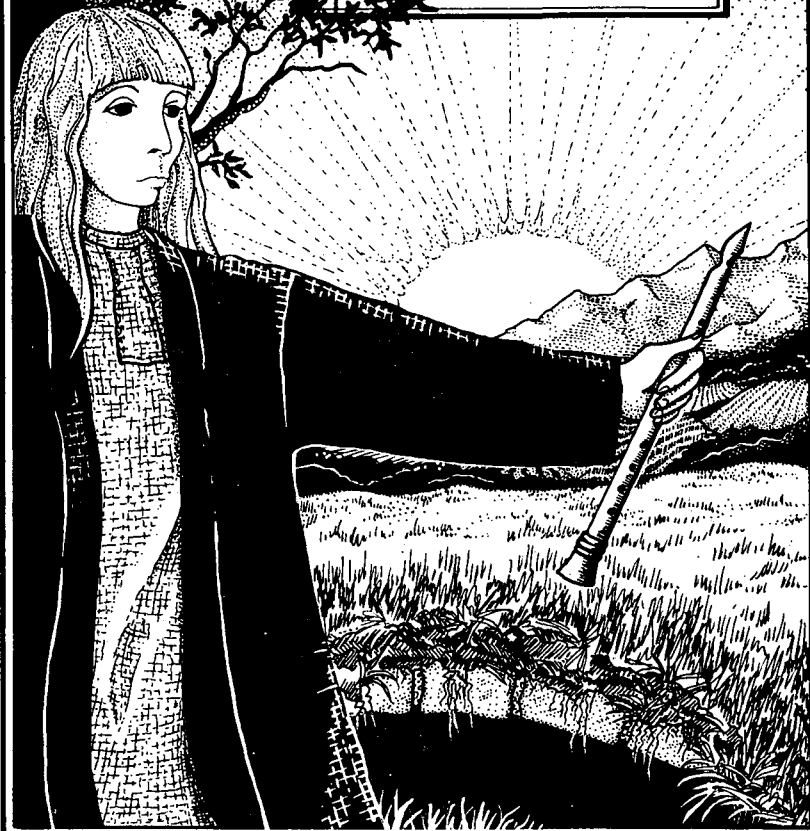


Illustration by Laurie Davis

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**T**he carter hauled back the reins and came to a slow halt. Nothing moved on either side of the road. He checked three times. "Nup," he said at last. "For sure I thought I saw somewhat." He urged his oxen on again. The beasts trudged forward with the load of lumber.

When the last creak of the wagon had died away, Polijn rose from the grass and stepped up onto the roadway. The man had looked amiable enough; maybe she should have tried for a ride. She shrugged, then shivered as a cold breeze spun past her. Best to keep warm by walking, she decided, and started down the road after the cart.

The Turinese were a suspicious folk and quick to anger, easier to steer clear of than to stay on the good side of. Polijn, having been rewarded with several coins but as many kicks for her singing, had decided to abandon Turin and try her luck farther west. She would gladly have gone south instead, to see the lands where the Great Minstrels were schooled, but she had to eat along the way; no one would pay to hear her sing where there were Great Minstrels in the neighborhood.

Moving ahead, she started to whistle "The Wrong Suitor," but a serious wind hit her.

There was no excess cloth in her overtunic to pull over her arms; Polijn just walked faster. Carasta had pawned her coat at the start of summer, and after what he'd done to the pawnbroker, there was no chance of redeeming it, even had she been inclined to walk that far. The weather was moving on into the cool of shorter days. At home, the pomp and parades of the King's Birthday would be approaching. This time last year . . . But why think about that? Polijn went on whistling "The Wrong Suitor," the wind whistling a counter melody.

She had only recently become a wandering minstrel, due to accidental involvement in royal politics and subsequent exile. At first she had wandered under the protection of the more experienced minstrel Carasta. This protection consisted mainly of using Polijn as bait in his schemes, and as a shield when those schemes collapsed.

So now Polijn traveled alone. It was a somewhat furtive life but better than she'd feared, and marginally more comfortable than life in the slums of Rossacotta. The rooms she could afford at inns she passed were no more than communal lofts, but they were sufficient for one who had slept in stables and alleys.

Carasta's protection had simply honed her sense of self-preservation. She halted when she saw the ugly burnt spots just off the road. If she was coming to a town that was in the habit of burning witches, she wanted to know about it before she saw the rooftops, provided she was imprudent enough to come even that close.

No. On approaching the marks, Polijn could see they were far too small. They were smudges from some kind of starshots, fireworks, like the ones they used for celebrations back home.

With so many trees about, though, this was a bad place for such an exhibition.

A mound of dirt attracted her attention. After a glance around, she scooped some of the earth away, uncovering sticks and a burnt piece of paper with half of a bright red eye painted on it. Another fragment showed the spike of a fang. Someone had tried to fake the appearance of a dragon, using a kite and fireworks, and then had buried the evidence.

Polijn looked back toward the road. She knew several songs about dragons that might be timely and well-rewarded if the townspeople were in the right mood. On the other hand, the clumsiness of whoever had made this attempt to cover up

the fake dragon made her wonder if Carasta had been this way before her. The village would be sour on minstrels in that case, and she might walk into whatever Carasta had left behind.

The wind tore a few tattered leaves from the trees. Polijn shrugged. If she kept herself perfectly safe, she might starve to death with a whole skin. She was cold and hungry, and she was going to have a look at the village ahead. If she earned no more than a meal and an old coat, that would do.

It was noon, but a cold noon, when she found the road ending in a healthy clump of houses. The man with the cart of lumber was nowhere to be seen, but there were plenty of others, crowding the streets and the main square. If this was a fair, it hadn't started yet. There were no signs of banners or merrymaking. Well, minstrels could play at any gathering.

She took up an inoffensive position on the lowest rung of a ladder propped against the nearest house. Without looking at it, she slid her flute from her pack and polished it against her overtunic. Between those two trees, over the rocks, and she could be in the forest. She wasn't positive she could outrun them, but that was one

benefit of being hungry: it kept you light.

Alternatively, she could dodge around that rain barrel and run into the village. Town hiding was more her speed, and there might be a chance of hiding somewhere near food. She nodded and began to play, as if to herself. Let a few members of the crowd turn toward her, and she'd see if they were smiling.

No smiles, no frowns. Well, the flute was in tune, and their attention was captured. What song? "Simon and the Slough-Thing" would probably win some smiles. Coming from far lands a thousand years ago, he had overthrown the Dragon Seat to become King Simon I, founder of the present dynasty and practically the only real hero Turin had. Every little clump of huts around a puddle claimed to have the burial mound of King Simon in its community. This lump of dirt would be decorated on the anniversaries of Simon's triumphs and guarded as a sacred spot. Where Polijn came from, tombs weren't advertised that way. They'd be cleaned out, body and all, before the corpse was cold.

Polijn sang one verse, as if to herself but loud enough to be heard at the back of the crowd. Then she lifted the flute for an interlude to check the crowd.

The music hadn't won them over, but no one had picked up a rock. She disliked that one man's grin, but maybe his teeth hurt him. Several people were looking beyond her, to a hill she had passed on her way in.

That was it. She had only to throw a few lines about the "one and only true tomb of King Simon" into the chorus.

Ha. She had them now. Two men started to clap in time, and the man with the grin was reaching for his pouch. Polijn built on the theme, explaining how the people of this village, most honored of all villages, had forever shown the respect and honor due the mighty hero. (She wished she knew the name of the village, but one couldn't have everything.)

A big-boned, dark-haired woman stepped from the doorway of the inn beyond the crowd. After looking around for the source of the music, she set her hands on her hips and cocked her head to one side. Her mouth dropped open.

It hung there in silence as Polijn started in on the second verse. Then, pointing at the minstrel, the woman screamed, "Another sign! It's another sign!"

The clapping stopped. More mouths hung open. Then the man who had been grinning bellowed, "Little meddler! Now

look what you've done!" He charged at her.

You never knew what would set them off, thought Polijn. The flute was up one sleeve before the man took his second step. There would be better times to figure out what had done it this time. On the man's third step, she was moving away from the ladder. At least she had no coat for them to grab, and her overtunic certainly had no excess cloth to act as a handle.

None of this mattered when she hit the ground, crushed into the dirt by the weight of the man who had been using the ladder. He naturally recovered first; wrapping his hand around her throat, he hauled her up and knocked her head against the ladder. "Witch!" he shouted. "Demon!" Polijn didn't resist as he shook her—with only one foot on the ground, she had no leverage.

The rest of the listeners were close enough now to offer aid and suggestions.

"Whack her!"

"Kick her!"

"Crush her!"

"Burn her!"

"Oh, joyful day!"

This last boomed above the rest with the echo of a good big drum. The crowd, startled, looked around for the speaker and forgot to shout. Only the

large-hipped woman who had started it went on, shaking a finger in Polijn's face and shouting, "You witch!"

The man coming up through the throng had to be the mayor or magistrate to judge by the way the crowd parted for him. His hands were raised to the sky, his head back. "Oh, the joy of the day!"

The big woman did hear that and turned to stare. At the same time, Polijn's captor released his grip enough for Polijn to get both feet on the ground. But the crowd was too compact now; there was nowhere to run. She stroked the bruises on her neck and waited for developments.

He was tall, with a gleam of mischief in his eyes and a beard known as the hangman's fringe, from the way it ran under the chin and around the neck. This would have told her, if the gleam in his eyes had not, that he was some kind of magic-monger. Who but a man of power would tempt the fates with whiskers of that design?

Polijn's captor and her accuser fell back as the man stepped up and set one hand against the ladder. "It is a true joy to meet you, my girl," he declared. "What can your name be?"

"Polijn, master."

"A name of ill omen,"



growled the big woman, her hands again resting on her cushioned hips.

The tall man glanced back, his eyebrows high. "Ill omen, Mitka?" he demanded.

"Why, Master Chulliken," said the woman, with a rather ungraceful curtsy, "this little imp came from nowhere and sang of the tomb, the King's Tomb."

"Nowhere?" he inquired, glancing at Polijn.

"Aye, that's true!" called a voice from the crowd. "I'd driv in by that road just the now, and passed nobody on the way."

"Is that not a sign?" Mitka demanded.

"Rejoice, my children!" boomed Chulliken, throwing his arms out. "It is most certainly a sign, and a sign that might never have occurred." He drew a bright flower from thin air and presented it to Polijn. "A sign that all may be well."

One or two halfhearted cries of "Hurrah!" came from the crowd, but most of the villagers still needed to be convinced. Polijn set the flower—it was paper—behind her left ear and turned as the man raised one of her hands in his.

"Well you remember, friends, the prophecies and signs passed down by your grandsires," he called. "The coming of the

dragon, the giant grasshopper that devoured the tops of your trees, the fire on the water by night, and the roasted fish that washed ashore at dawn: all have come about. Yes, my friends, the forces of evil mass anew, as was predicted.

"But rejoice!" He all but pulled Polijn's arm out of the socket as he rose to his toes on the word. "Our forefathers knew well that the evils they defeated would not lie dead forever and took precautions. Did they not also foretell that, come the day of evil, ancient heroes should return to initiate a new age of plenty and joy?"

"Aye!" came an answer. "After the war."

"And what of this war?" Chulliken replied, shaking his free hand at the skies. "Where will it take place? If the ancient heroes ride forth now, when the source of evil is still taking form in the north, then the war will take shape there, laying waste to the desolate villages of the northerners. Your forefathers have judged you worthy to be rescued from this war and have sent this minstrel to enter the Tomb of the King and send him to the north."

The crowd thought this over. Polijn thought about it, too. It did not sound pleasant, but it was an improvement over being burned. And she knew a lit-

tle something about that dragon, too. Master Chulliken was working another game.

"I did not know this was to be my duty," she announced in perfect truth. "But these people are certainly worthy of the service."

Chulliken nodded to her. This was all he needed. "Rejoice, then, my children," he shouted. "This is a sign that war and its evils will not come to our village."

The crowd was convinced, and the rejoicing was unanimous. An impromptu fair developed, with a banquet. Mitka herself served plate after plate of hot food to "Mistress Polijn." Polijn didn't even have to sing for her supper; she offered, but the expressions of terror on the faces of the villagers convinced her that she was much too potent an omen to do anything but eat. She regarded Chulliken with a new respect; this was a more useful trick than she had seen from most real sorcerers.

She knew quite well, however, that the meal would eventually have to be paid for. After nightfall, the magician rose and announced to the festive crowd, "Now, as the moon rises, I must take Mistress Polijn aside and instruct her, for the tombs of the mighty are not to be entered without peril. You

men uncover the door; I have put words of protection on you all that will guard you."

Eight men stopped smiling and fetched shovels from an inn. The group moved to a high mound outside the village, with the rest of the inhabitants following at a safe interval.

Not without a look back at Chulliken, the men inserted the shovels and began to pry up sod. The magician did not watch the excavation but escorted Polijn to a clump of trees not far away.

"There is a tomb there?" Polijn asked.

"There is, my child, but it is in no way King Simon's, nor are we on the verge of a great golden age."

Polijn felt it would be polite to let her mouth drop open in shock. In a low voice much different from that he had used to the crowd, Chulliken went on, "I cannot explain in detail now, for it would take time, and likely you would not understand the procedures anyway. But the dragon, grasshopper, and burning river were illusions of mine. Magic-workers are not valued in this country, nor are we particularly welcome. I had to create an atmosphere that would make me more desirable."

"But if I go into the tomb . . ." Polijn began, not seeing why he

would want to risk his new status by proving the tomb was not genuine.

He misunderstood. "Don't fear, my child. This is an old tomb, and its plan is recorded in some of the ancient books of lore. You will enter in front, but you will leave by the side. Seventy paces inside, and to your left, you will find a corridor that ends in a concealed door within a cave. It should open easily to your touch, but my apprentice and I will be waiting outside to help you."

Chulliken squatted a bit so that he could look her directly in the face. "Here is all I want from you. You will enter the tomb—that will be frightening, I know, but you will have a light, and need not go all the way in—and walk to the secret exit. There may well be some treasure left in the place: take what you will, with my blessing. Once outside, you will then take the road to the west and never come next or nigh this village again. I will explain, using a few more illusions to substantiate it, that you and King Simon have left to battle evils in the north. Thus we all profit: I retain my prestige, and you at least come to no harm, and may pick up a few jewels in the process."

This close, the magician had a great look of Carasta, shak-

ing Polijn's confidence in him. Carasta's schemes hardly ever worked. When they did, it was the result of a great deal of work, not previously mentioned by Carasta, on Polijn's part. But as was the case with Carasta's schemes, Polijn couldn't see that she had much choice.

"Will you do as I ask, child?"

"It sounds easy," said Polijn.

The magician took this as a commitment and led her back to the mound, where large squares of sod had been removed to reveal a great stone block with a ring in the center. This block was sealed at the edges, but Chulliken drew a dagger and pried out the mortar. At his command, four men dragged the stone loose. The crowd cheered in an uncertain way and pulled in to watch.

Polijn checked one last time for a place to run as Chulliken explained, "The ceremonies to be performed on this joyous night should take almost until dawn. It is fitting: the rise of the sun shall symbolize the rise of good in defeat of evil. I suggest that a guard be posted to prevent the servants of evil from following our messenger into the tomb and that the rest of us go home to bed, the better to greet His Majesty in the morning."

And with that, he set off

through the crowd, pausing only here and there to advocate rejoicing. Polijn watched him in some admiration. Here was no sneaking off to set up his tricks; he announced he was leaving and left everyone else to do what they would.

And what would she do? Polijn looked at the crowd, which looked back. The stage was hers alone.

She took the torch that was being offered her. "Until morning!" she called. "Don't forget to rejoice, now." She ducked through the little doorway to the sound of cautious rejoicing.

Polijn had no particular terror of the distant dead, who had never done her a bit of damage. The living were another matter. The first thing to be done was verify the existence of that exit. Polijn slipped along the paved floor. It was clean, and the air did not smell bad. She'd strolled through uglier buildings.

And smaller ones. Seventy paces into the corridor showed her no exit corridor. Polijn shrugged. There were paces and there were paces. She moved on farther. How well these stones were joined! Rossacotta was a center for such building; she could tell this was expert work. The wall carvings showed thorough skill. They also showed the mark of a Rossacottan workman, who had

signed his carving with the emblem of the royal flag. If a Rossacottan had been hired to build this tomb, that certainly explained the secret exit. Polijn found the corridor just six of her own paces past the symbol.

She stopped there. If she left now, without bothering about any treasure, she would have lost nothing and could leave town that much the sooner. But it was a well-built structure, and whoever had built it had gone to the expense of bringing in artisans from out of the country. There might be something worth taking here, provided the Rossacottan himself hadn't come back and stripped the place bare. Maybe that was why everything was so clean; the tomb was empty.

She stepped beyond the dark opening to the corridor, and stumbled over a shadow. The burial complex was not completely empty then. She caught at the tail of a carved horse on the wall and did not hit the smooth, cool flagstones.

Polijn did not have to look over the scene twice to recognize it. The Rossacottan artisan had obviously made some mistake in returning to loot his handiwork. Here were his tools in a neat bundle. There was his coat, which he had pulled off so it wouldn't hamper him while he worked.

And there, stretched headlong on the stones, was the Rossacottan workman himself. At any rate, it was an arrangement of clothes in the shape of a man, and hair showed above the collar. Polijn had no curiosity about the face. The tomb had been sealed for some years now.

She started forward again, and paused. Then, raising the torch high in one hand, she touched the robber's coat with the other. Autumn penetrated even down here, or else it was just naturally cold. Being a sensible person, she shook the coat out before she threw it over her shoulders. Nothing seemed to be living in it.

Polijn stepped across the interrupted burglary. If the Rossacottan had failed, there might be something useful left up ahead. Unless, of course, there had been a pair of Rossacottans involved, and one of them had decided not to split the booty. She shook her head. A Rossacottan would not have left the coat and the tools to sit in the dust.

She paused again. Dust? She turned her light on all corners of the corridor. No dust. And no mold. Just clean, carven stone, glistening in the light.

Polijn suddenly liked the tomb much less, and turned back toward the exit. The stone

smile of an eagle gleamed at her. And Polijn didn't like that gleam much, either.

Polijn moved toward the exit. The gleam did not move. Polijn frowned. If her torch moved, why hadn't the reflected light?

Her head turned very slowly to look behind her. At the far end of the corridor was a rectangle that glowed.

She bit her lip. Then she tiptoed to the body of the Rossacottan workman and knelt beside it. She saw an ear. Rising, she stepped down the stone passage, not without several glances back at the exit she should have taken in the first place.

Beyond the door, heaps of golden helmets and jewelled belts sat in a row. Atop each of the eight stacks was a glowing gem, each of a different color. This augmented rainbow shone on cups and belts and stacks of swords. Polijn recognized not a single pattern, not even a picture on a coin: everything was monstrously old, but not worn.

A little silver harp sat in one stack. Her hand went to it and then pulled back. The eyes of a gigantic golden horse were upon her.

Polijn stepped around the stack. It was not a horse made of gold.

That jewelled saddle was not for show but for use. The horse

was waiting for its master.

This master and his seven companions sat in a row of chairs with backs tilted for comfort. Each wore a light, flowing shift. One held a cup in his lap. Another held a beautiful blue flute. Their eyes were closed, and each smiled, as if in pleasant dreams. Even as her presumption shocked her, Polijn looked around to see if there might be an empty chair available.

There was no wall behind them, only darkness. It was not the darkness of shadows in which a killer might wait but the darkness inside the eyelids as you fall asleep.

Their shields rested at their feet, but Polijn hardly needed to read the names. Here slept King Simon, and the Knight of Allanoy, and all the other heroes and heroines of that particular legend.

"The banner came into his hand," she whispered. "He raised it thrice and swung it thrice from right to left."

No one moved. Then Polijn slid backward among the piles of treasure, which might have been beehives for all she'd meddle with them now. She would not steal from King Simon. It might wake him up, and all other considerations to one side, that seemed a pity when he was sleeping so nicely.

At the door, she turned and ran, with soft, padding footsteps she had learned over years of escaping. She nodded to her countryman as she fled into the exit corridor. He wouldn't be needing his coat until he woke up, and at least she wasn't stealing from the king.

One sleeve of the coat caught on the projecting hoof of a carved warhorse. Polijn stopped at once to pull it free. There was no use tearing the coat, now that she had one. And no one was chasing her, so she could walk the rest of the way.

She saw the end of the exit ahead of her, and nodded. Chuliken knew what he was doing.

But did she know what he was doing? She put one hand on the door but waited. He had known about this corridor. He said he'd read about it in a book. How, then, could the rest of the tomb's interior be a secret to him?

Something creaked. Polijn ground the torch out on the floor and threw herself flat against the wall.

"Nothing, master," said a woman's voice. "Something's gone wrong."

"Mitka, you worry too much," answered Chuliken. Mitka? Was she the magician's apprentice, then?

"If Simon doesn't blast her



for her impertinence, we'll stick her when she runs out. She'll be too scared to notice until she's dead on the ground. These scrawny little things are all eyes and stomach and no brains."

"Minstrels do have powers, master," said Mitka.

"Farland had powers and wouldn't teach them to me," growled the magician. "So I taught him a thing or two. And then went to find a better teacher. It took four hundred years for me to be ready for this, and six hundred to find the tomb again."

"Huh!" said the woman. "If you saw him buried, why couldn't you remember?"

"Silence," hissed Chulliken. "I was five years old, not even born when the swine took the throne from my grandfather. But I'll have revenge, if I have to wait a while for the throne. The reappearance of Simon will throw the country into chaos, and foster terror. And he must die sometime, and be unavailable when our master really begins his rise."

Polijn looked back down the exit corridor. If only she had the king's help. But that was what she'd have to avoid, at all costs. She could simply go steal that harp, of course, and be put to sleep like the other robber. But Chulliken would find

someone else to use in his plot, and she'd wake up. That left only one other exit. But this would really be quicker. Walk out to be stabbed, and thus miss all the fuss and horror of these tremendous schemes.

The hidden door creaked shut again as Mitka argued, not very confidently, that someone ought to go in and see what was taking so long. Polijn stepped from hiding and reached with one hand toward the door. The rough sleeve of her borrowed coat slid across her hand. Rossacottans were not known as good weavers, except weavers of devilry.

Polijn shrugged. Why not? Roses and moons, she'd been making her living with her mouth for years.

Minutes later, the crowd still watching at the main door of the tomb heard merry flute music. Gasps and a few shrieks broke from the witnesses as the little minstrel they had sent into the tomb returned, without her torch but wearing a coat she had not worn before.

Polijn lowered the flute and let the crowd be sure who this was. But she had to get her story in before Mitka or Chulliken could get back here to see what was going on. And the story had to flatter.

"Good people, rejoice!" she called. Best to move from the

familiar to the unfamiliar in these matters. "There are those who have doubted this was truly the tomb of King Simon the First, Simon the Bold!"

Denial was unanimous enough to assure her that she had struck the right chord. "But though I once doubted, I know now that this is that mighty tomb. The king is within, and is pleased with his people!"

She drew her arm in a great arc to show that by "his people" she meant not some vague national group, but this specific, worthy village.

"Did you see him?" someone shouted.

"What did he say to you?"

"Where is he now?"

"His Majesty was most gracious, as is only to be expected, and bestowed upon me this coat of the messenger." She raised both arms to show off the plain black coat. "You have proved to him that the world is not yet so evil that he must come forth. His message is that you may cover this doorway and leave the tomb undisturbed. You are to have at least a generation yet of peace."

It was a good message, and several villagers cheered. But the people of Turin had a streak of common sense most commonly expressed as suspicion.

"And that was all?" demanded a burly woodcutter, advancing from the crowd.

Polijn raised a hand, and he stopped. "It is not. There are further tidings. Is Driander here?"

The mayor of the village was a short, balding grain dealer. He stepped forward, only to be halted by the heavy hand of his wife. "Not a speck of money must you give her," she told him, "no matter what she claims His Majesty said." Several onlookers nodded.

Driander shook himself loose and stepped forward. He cleared his throat. "The message is for me, ma'am? His Majesty said my name? Not Chul-liken's?"

Polijn bowed to the mayor, as was only befitting a man who received messages from kings. "You will understand presently, Your Honor, why the message is for you. In reward for the prompt resealing of the tomb, which His Majesty knows you will not delay..."

The mayor waited for the rest of the sentence. Then, understanding, he signaled to the men who had opened the doorway. They seized their shovels and moved in to work, though not so loudly that they couldn't hear.

Polijn nodded. "Three prophecies does His Majesty send

you, four words of warning that are to be yours. First, make sure that the dams will be proof against the spring rains."

The crowd moved in. This was something more comprehensible than sleeping kings and mighty evils. The dams always needed repairing; a good king like Simon would realize that and send warning if the rains would be especially heavy in spring.

"Second," Polijn went on, "there is one among you who must check his hay. Poisonous weeds were accidentally put up with it, which will injure the young of his animals. His lands lie just to the north."

Several farmers whose farms were north of the village cried out in disgust. "I knew that man of mine wasn't keeping his eyes open!" one roared. Everyone nodded at the wisdom of the king.

"Great harm will befall a town with too many inns," Polijn went on. A pair of innkeepers looked troubled, but she continued, "His Majesty leaves it to you to determine which inn should be closed, but would mention that sometimes men leaving the one nearest his tomb have been guilty of discourtesy at his tomb."

They wouldn't take long to realize this was Mitka's inn, so Polijn hurried on, "And his

fourth warning is that the descendant of His Majesty, your current king, may he live forever, intends to levy a new tax on counties that shelter a magic-worker. A great sum of money will be demanded, for the treasury ministers have assured him that people who associate with a sorcerer will easily be able to pay."

The exclamations about the wisdom and kindness of King Simon were mixed with imprecations on the greed and wasteful habits of bureaucrats and tax collectors. Polijn let them growl to themselves for a while, and then called, "But if you put magic-workers away from you, you will never hear of this tax again." Which was true, of course.

Driander was clearing his throat to respond to the words of wisdom from the sleeping king when a voice bellowed, "Good people! What word? Have we reason to rejoice?"

The silent crowd turned to face the magician. Polijn raised her flute and started in on "The Battlecry of Simon the Bold." Plain murder stood out in Chulliken's eyes.

But he was still smiling. "What has happened, good people? Has His Majesty sent tidings?" One hand disappeared up its sleeve.

The men with shovels had

raised them. Other villagers were picking up bits of firewood to use as clubs. This was too much for Mitka, who had been waiting behind a tree from which she could watch all doors to the tomb.

"What are you doing?" demanded the woman, darting up in front of the magician. "This is the luck of the village, our wizard, our magic!"

She was tossing oil on the troubled fires. "Lightning strike the wizard!" someone shouted.

"He's no wizard! He was just off in the woods with Mitka!"

"He's a wizard! Take his head to the king for a bounty!"

"Mitka's head, too!"

"They won't have our money!"

Mitka preferred to postpone this debate until later and took off for the woods. Chulliken, though he was backing away, was willing to take the offensive.

"Hold!" he shouted, one arm raised above his head.

The crowd halted, but a stone

was already in the air. It hit the arm the magician had not raised, and a golden dagger slid from the sleeve. Polijn, suspecting where that dagger had been intended to land, played louder.

"A blade, a blade?" someone shouted. "He meant to kill the mayor!"

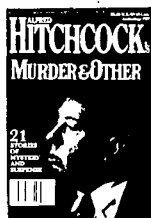
This was doubtless untrue, and Chulliken tried to deny it. But the next rock hit him in the mouth. He turned to imitate his apprentice, and the villagers surged forward. Polijn played until the entire assembly was out of sight. If the magician had any actual magic beyond his extended life, he'd need it now.

There was a chance that he might be able to win the crowd over. In any case, Polijn felt immediate disappearance was her best plan now, too. She paused at the banquet table to fill her borrowed pockets with leftover rolls and apples. Then, with a salute to the half-buried doorway of the king's tomb, she strode off into the night.

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FICTION

# Just South of Felicidad

by Mike  
Drummond

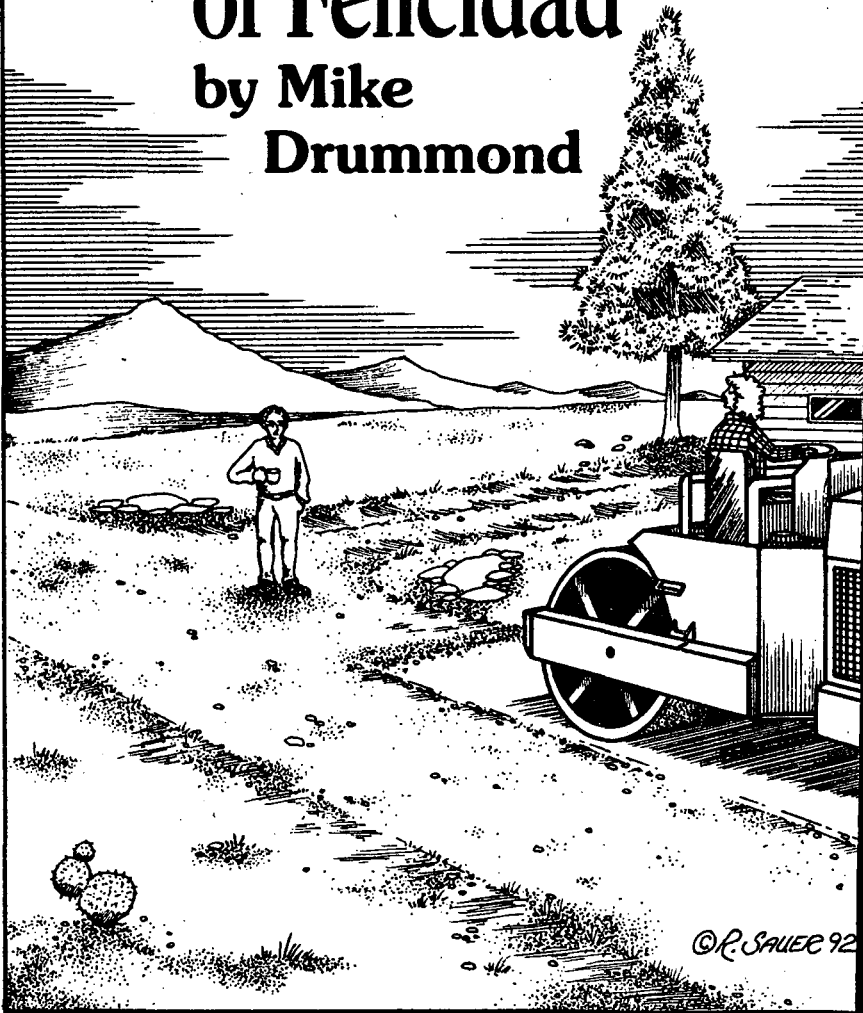


Illustration by Richard Sauer

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“S it down, female, and shut up. Your brains are all scrambled.”

Ernie balled her gnarly fists in protest and pounded the tiny table, sending beer mugs and ashtrays skittering in all directions.

“If my brains are addled,” she hooted, “it’s on account of that damned washboard road, Hank MacAdam, you insufferable tightwad. I pound a hole through the roof of the cab with my skull every time I drive it.”

“Now, don’t go blaming your sorry looks on our road, you crazy old coot.”

A rumble rose from the crowd. Someone cursed and tossed a longneck toward the stage. Hank flinched as the empty bottle bounced off the chicken wire screen separating him from the rest of us. Big Bud, who owned the bar, had erected the screen to protect his Saturday night musicians from any impromptu musical criticism arising from the dance floor. I doubt that he intended it for Road Association meetings, but it worked.

“Who in hell threw that?” Hank snarled, baring the clenched incisors of an expensive set of dentures. He was poised, ready to toss his gavel at the offending party.

“Let’s get on with it,” I

shouted. “It was your idea to hold the dang meeting in a bar-room, so what did you expect?”

I don’t ordinarily display much emotion, or speak in compound sentences for that matter, but everyone else in our fifteen family Road Association already had done both, which meant that this was the longest, most tense meeting ever. And nothing had been accomplished except that Hank MacAdam got a chance to act pompous, and Ernie got a few chances to try her hand at popping Hank’s balloon. After two beers, I was feeling peevish and hostile when I should have been feeling mellow. And all on account of that washed-out gravel gully we call our road.

“We are no nearer agreeing on a paving contract than we’ve ever been,” Hank said.

“Just bring out your grader like you always done,” Ernie called.

“Them days are over, friends,” he said. “We will be paving that road twelve feet wide and three and a half inches thick with grade A blacktop before the winter weather sets in.”

“Who named you king of the road?”

A full beer mug crashed into the screen, dousing Hank and everyone at the front tables.

“Okay for you,” Hank said

evenly. "We'll see about this."

He brought the gavel down so hard the handle snapped off. He fumbled as he jammed the broken pieces into his coat pocket and stalked across the barroom floor. He paused in the doorway, silhouetted by the afternoon sun.

"See you hillbillies in court," he hissed.

He slammed the door to his late model Caddy and roared out of the graveled lot in a cloud of grit and pop-tops. I heaved a sigh, partly of relief, partly of disgust. I had moved to Felicidad to get away from just the kind of big-city tension Hank MacAdam represented. And it took some doing for me to find my little piece of paradise here in the Sierra foothills.

On the way to my place, a narrow two-lane hugs the lower contours of the parched hills, passing miles of scrub oak and digger pine, passing vast eroded hillsides scarred well over a hundred years ago by hydraulic miners who took aim with giant water "cannons" called monitors and sent unending jets of water onto the cliffsides, jarring loose the rock and sand and the ore, of course. Gold was once the point at Felicidad. But like happiness, the gold was fleeting. Soon downstream villages complained loudly of silt-laden waterways,

the California legislature listened, and hydraulicking was banned forever. The boom town that was Felicidad went bust.

But it didn't die—not exactly. It shrank, and cracked, and dried, and burned. One by one, the wooden structures were reduced to charred litter on the ground until a single squat brick building remained by the roadside. In its heyday the building had been a hotel and a "sportin' house." When the gold and women disappeared, it became the last resort for transients, and finally it stood boarded up and abandoned even by them.

Then new life trickled into the foothills from the cities to the west. It was the late sixties, a time of idealism or escapism, depending on your point of view. Ramshackle communes sprang up suddenly and then died as quickly as wildflowers in the desert, victims of either economic or moral bankruptcy, destitute nonetheless. With these hippies came young families, homesteading, going "back to the land." Retirees came, too, with monthly checks from wherever on earth they had carefully deposited forty years of their lives. And there were others, desperadoes and rockhounds and those drawn by the dim afterglow of goldrush times in Felicidad.

Enough people for one brave entrepreneur named Big Bud to buy and renovate the lone brick building, rename it the General Store, and turn it into the focal point for the scores of folks who lived secreted away in the folds of the encompassing hills. It was the only show in what couldn't really be called a town. On weekdays bread and beer and other staples were available, mail and messages were dropped off and news exchanged. There was even a small limited menu cafe, with topnotch greasy spoon cooking. On Saturday nights the backroom bar where we had our road meeting came alive with a wild assortment that only those hills could produce. Pensioners in polyester; homesteaders in homespun; leather-jacketed, tattooed bikers with eight-inch knife blades sheathed conspicuously on their hips, all swirling together without ever mixing.

This is where I've lived for five years, just south of Felicidad. I'm a definite refugee from big city life. I own a four by four truck, a chainsaw, and a hand-built cabin on forty acres of timber and rocks deep in a notch leading up to the Sierra crest. No phone, no power lines, no government services. The only access is that damned rutted dirt road that runs along-

side the seasonal creek bed. Sixteen parcels, like mine more or less, front on the same road. Over time I've met most of my neighbors, helped out and been helped by a few, but for the most part we just nod in passing and keep to ourselves, living whatever life it is that being in the woods inspired. Until Hank MacAdam got ideas. Delusions, Ernie had called them one evening when we met at the end of the road where the mailboxes are grouped.

"Damnedest thing," the old woman sputtered as she shook the envelope in her hand. "Got to be Hank MacAdam behind all this. What in hell do we need a paved road for, anyway?"

"Who knows, Ernie? It might improve property values," I said.

"Why do that? You planning to sell? I'm not. And if I was, where would I move? The whole world is crawling with people... like lice on a beggar's bottom."

"There goes my appetite, Ernie," I said, spitting out a stale wad of Juicy Fruit. "It doesn't matter if I'm moving or not, everyone on the road got one. The court date is Tuesday."

"All the way into the courthouse at Del Oro. A complete waste of gas. That damned MacAdam."

Ernie and Hank had a long-standing feud that predated my arrival and the arrival of anyone else on the road. It might have been taken for some weird mating dance except for the ferocity of Ernie's responses. On several occasions when Ernie had had a few, I'd seen Hank's butt and his jet black toupee bounce off the floor a good ten feet apart. And once she ground her boot heel into his upper plate after it popped loose during an argument.

I try not to take sides, but Hank MacAdam wasn't my favorite neighbor, either. I didn't know much about him except what he told me himself when we met occasionally on the road and he launched into one of his monologues. He lived two parcels beyond mine, at the end of the road, and in some ways was a great neighbor. He had a small parking lot full of earth-moving equipment tucked away out of sight in one corner of his yard—a handy man to know after a heavy snow. If you could take his mouth. Hank had a one-track mind when it came to the road. It was a narrow logging trail of red clay soil mixed with gravel, washed out in spots, bumpy in others, but usually patched and passable. Still, for Hank nothing would do until the whole thing was graded and ditched and paved

with blacktop trucked in from Del Oro.

Rumor was that Hank MacAdam, who originally subdivided the land we all lived on back in the forties, had enough money salted away to finance the whole operation himself, but Hank didn't get that money by being a spendthrift. He wanted every one of us to pay equal shares, which amounted to almost three thousand dollars each.

He was the first neighbor I met after I bought my place. I had barely pulled my trailer into the clearing and begun working on the cabin when he rolled in. After a preliminary "howdy," he'd started right in on "the road situation." It was a monologue I was to hear at least annually from that point on. Now Hank was taking his neighbors to court to get the Road Association to perform.

The old Del Oro courthouse might have been remodeled as recently as the early years of the FDR presidency. The cool, dark chambers and creaking wooden benches were as uncomfortable as they sound. Weary Judge Cranepool arched an eyebrow and listened to Hank MacAdam, decked out in a nicely fitted three-piece suit, as he droned down his laundry list of grievances.

The rest of us spent our time sneaking furtive looks at each other. We were a ragtag lot. Besides myself, there was a male-female couple of reed-thin back-to-the-landers who were still trying to eke out a living doing the craft fair circuit with some ingenious wooden toys they built at home; a self-proclaimed psychic named Bunny Skinner who lived alone in a trailer with her wornout deck of tarot cards and her stale, dim auras; assorted retirees slowly sinking inside their clothes; and of course the baseball-capped Bump twins, Cody and Bodie, who were amassing a sort of automotive graveyard in their front yard, which was only partially hidden from the road by the trees. Cody or Bodie—I've never wanted to know how to distinguish them—flashed me a grin through three days' stubble, exposing a mossy buildup where his teeth met his gums.

I cut my eyes away, fought an involuntary urge to gag, and ran my tongue across my teeth. Ernie caught my eye and shook a scrawled list in my face. Old Ernie, short for Ernestine—sixty-fiveish, getting deaf, and talking loud to compensate—drove a big old rusting International station wagon, chopped her own firewood and her own steel-grey hair (proba-

bly with the same axe, from the looks of things), and took care of a dozen Nubian goats and a hundred stray cats on a parcel that was opposite mine.

"Everyone ain't here," she muttered.

Some of the parcels had absentee owners, and others had owners who were too shy or otherwise disinclined to make a courtroom appearance, even in civil court where a victory might save them some money.

None of us had done enough homework. A few old geezers made feeble protests, claiming poverty or that a paved road would lead to speeding and traffic accidents or, worst of all, would attract tourists and sightseers. One scruffy type whom I'd seen on the road a few times recently sat in the back and seemed very upset, but he didn't say anything. Ernie protested the longest and loudest, but in the end none of it mattered.

Judge Cranepool's statement summed up the inevitable.

"Each of your deeds provides for the formation of a Road Association and the allocation of costs among the property owners. You each knew that going in, providing you took the time to read your deed or have it read to you. As for a paved road's attracting tourists, need I remind you that Sheriff Wyler

never sends fewer than three squad cars to Felicidad whenever there is a 'minor' disturbance at that darned bar on Saturday nights. It is doubtful that any tourist in his or her right mind would ever voluntarily set foot anywhere near your forsaken neck of the woods."

Ernie snickered and whispered to me, "He left out the U.S. Army. That was a helluva show."

I nodded. Two autumns before, federal troops had been airlifted into the hills surrounding Felicidad in a sweeping drug enforcement raid looking for pot fields and drug labs hidden in the remote canyons. Helicopters and forty men with assault rifles terrorized the squirrels and squashed the last of my tomato plants. All they had netted for their trouble was one sprained ankle and two scrawny marijuana plants on an uninhabited piece of land that the government had seized the prior year after a drug raid. The consensus was that the originally confiscated plants had reseeded themselves before being torched. They didn't need tanks and flame-throwers, they needed a weed-whacker. The ACLU had a field day on that one, but I stayed out of it, squashed tomatoes and all.

Our judge confirmed Hank

MacAdam as chairman pro-tem of the association, and set a court-sanctioned date for one more meeting before the commencement of paving.

"I know this will be a hard assignment for most of you," the judge said, "but try to behave like adults. I don't want to see any of you dead-end kids back here again—about the road or anything else. Case closed."

If I ever move, I will locate my front porch on the center divider of the busiest, noisiest interstate in the country before I live on a private road again. I more than compensated for my many pleasant days of solitude with a few gut-wrenching hours at that forced Road Association meeting in the beery atmosphere of the General Store. This time representatives were present from eleven of the sixteen parcels.

Hank nominated himself as permanent president, and Ernie quickly nominated me (over my protests) and moved to close the nominations. It was a close vote, decided by three votes in favor of Hank from letters he held that were written by some of the absentee owners. I was gracious in defeat and very relieved until Ernie insisted that as runner-up, I be named vice-president. She called for a vote



and received automatic ayes from everyone but me and Hank.

Since the paving seemed inevitable, Ernie lobbied for driveways to be included. Most of us had steep driveways leading down to the road, and mine, for one, was a study in advanced erosion with wide tire-clutching creases running from top to bottom.

"Let's stick to our knitting," Hank declared. "Property owners have got thirty days to raise the cash or take a lien on their property for costs plus legal expenses."

"Like hell, you old pootstain," Ernie yelled.

The others added descriptive names of their own but were quickly gaveled down.

"Law's on my side," Hank sneered and adjourned the meeting. Then with one hand on his toupee and the other protecting his mouth he jostled his way to the door. He was laughing when he roared out of the parking lot toward home. It was the first time I'd ever seen Hank MacAdam laugh, and it wasn't pretty. I didn't know it then, but it was also the last time I would ever see him alive.

**T**hings were quiet for a few days. I raised my share of the cash without much trouble, but

Hank never came by to collect. Then one morning a loud diesel hum and the crash and scrape of steel on rock got me out of bed early. From the cabin I can't see the road, so I dressed, poured myself a mug of double-caffinated, and strolled down my rutted driveway for a look.

The first thing I noticed was that the driveway ruts were gone. Hank MacAdam's backhoe was hard at work clawing a humpback out of the road and pulling the excess earth into a pitlike hole right where Ernie's driveway met the road. It looked like an uncharacteristic act of atonement on Hank's part, but when the backhoe turned, I caught a glimpse of Ernie's trademark plaid jacket at the controls. That was a shock. MacAdam never let anyone else use his equipment.

Ernie handled the big machine expertly—not that I was surprised. When I caught her eye, she flashed a quick grin and then focused back on her task. In five minutes the roadway was bladed and smooth and there was a kinder, gentler transition grade up her driveway. And as I said, my driveway had also been graded smooth. She killed the engine when a Del Oro aggregate truck pulled up with a steaming load of blacktop.

It looked as if they were go-

ing to dump the load right there, and I walked down to find out why. It would have made more sense to start at the end of the road near Hank's place and then work out to the county road.

"Ernie," I shouted, "why start here? You afraid the association will run out of money before we get this far?"

"Stop jawing and start raking," she said. I grabbed a rake and helped her smooth the asphalt as the driver laid a thick black trail down her driveway and mine and across the road. The tar fumes did more to wake me up than the coffee had.

When the dump truck left, she fired up Hank's little steamroller and ran it back and forth until the whole thing was smooth.

"I wish you'd told me that today was the day," I said. "I've got plans for this afternoon."

"Just two loads today," she shouted. "We'll be done by ten. Might rain this afternoon. Here's enough to cover the steep grade up to my place and a little patch out here on the main road, plus, of course, your drive. Besides, this ain't Road Association paving."

"No?"

"Naw. It's all on Hank MacAdam." Ernie almost smiled.

"A peace offering, huh? Where is Hank, anyway? I'm

surprised he let you run his precious equipment."

"Oh, he's around, I imagine," she said, with a twinkle in her eye. "And this here is all on him."

Ernie paid the truck driver from an old envelope full of cash and had just put the receipt in her pocket when a car pulled up. It was a burned-out late sixties Buick Riviera with most of the original paint rusted off. The interior looked as if it hadn't been vacuumed since the Watergate break-in. The driver was the scruffy type who had been lurking in the background and hadn't said much during our court appearance. As near as I could figure, he lived on the vacant parcel between Ernie and Hank.

"Damn road's going in, huh?" he mumbled.

"No thanks to you, scumbag," Ernie shouted.

She tends to overreact.

I forgot to mention that I'm the only one on our road who is consistently on speaking terms with Ernie. It might have something to do with the fact that I like cats. Over time a few of Ernie's have strayed over to my place, and I set out a bowl or two of food when I see them. Most of them stay for only a few days—like a vacation in the country—before returning to the more densely populated

cat-city that Ernie's represents. Ernie knows that, and that I wouldn't shoot or trap the cats even if they did become a nuisance, which they hadn't.

But she had no such fondness for our new neighbor, who appeared to be doing nothing for the property values. She swung her rake like a clean-up hitter and cracked off the rest of the car radio antenna even with the roof. Mr. Scruffy cut loose with a string of obscenities and floored it, chewing twin ruts through the still soft asphalt with his tires.

"Damn trash," she said. "He's up to no good, you know."

I didn't, but I was about to learn.

**D**ays can slide into each other when you live alone in the woods. I've got a routine that keeps me clean and sane most of the time. But after that morning helping Ernie, I spent a week at home, brushing out an area behind my house. It's slow work clearing mesquite and scrub oak, especially when it's done by hand, but the end result is better—more natural than using a bulldozer. And it gives me time to meditate.

Anyway, I began to notice more than the usual number of vacationing cats at my place.

Six or seven had been the maximum before, and now I had close to twenty, including two full litters of kittens who must have been carried one at a time from Ernie's by their mothers. Ernie was pretty good about getting the females fixed when she rescued them; I made a note to tell her about these two kitten factories.

On my way over to Ernie's I noticed that no more work had been done on the road. The new blacktop stretching up her driveway and mine was pristine, but the patch in the middle that crossed the roadway was criss-crossed with dozens of sets of dusty tire tracks coming and going from Hank MacAdam's and Mr. Scruffy's, the only two places farther up the road.

Old Ernie's place is no Currier & Ives print, even after a snowfall. She was the original recycler. The goat pen alone was made from odds and ends of a dozen types of fencing. The Nubians' naturally long faces were lined up to greet me. For some reason it had the feel of a concentration camp photo. When I got to the fence, I saw why. Both the cast-iron sinks Ernie used to water the goats were bone dry. And there was no feed anywhere. If you've ever seen a goat pen, you know feed is easy to spot, since the

goats have already stripped the place of every other possible source of nourishment. I reached in and turned on a spigot to fill the sinks.

Cats scurried under the porch or lounged on the rooftops in the sun. Her truck was parked under a sagging lean-to, but nothing stirred inside the shack. If Ernie had been moving around inside, the thin subflooring would have been booming and a high-volume, nonstop, semi-profane monologue would have been drifting out through the cracks in the siding. I stomped around on the porch disturbing the cats and then knocked and peeked inside, but things didn't look any more disarrayed than usual.

I found her behind the privy, crumpled among a jumble of bald tires, the front of her skull crushed in. The murder weapon must have been the blunt end of the bloody axe that lay nearby. From the looks of things she'd been caught with her pants down while using the outhouse and had met her attacker head-on. I covered her with some scraps of cardboard, the only thing handy.

Hank MacAdam's name flashed to mind. He probably had a motive, but direct assault didn't seem to be his style. He was a lawsuit type of guy, and besides, he never walked any-

where. Since there were no dusty tire tracks on Ernie's new pavement, that let him out.

Leaving most of the rest of the world suspect, although not too many within walking distance. I had my suspicions. The battery was run down on Ernie's truck, so I couldn't raise anyone on the CB. Time for a little backwoods justice.

I hiked home to arm myself before approaching Mr. Scruffy. Given my limited arsenal, I had two choices: an old Remington pump shotgun that would be impossible to conceal, or the little Smith & Wesson .38 Bodyguard with the two inch barrel. It wasn't very accurate over distance, especially in my hands, but if I had to use it, I'd be measuring the distance in inches, not yards. The cold steel nestled in my jacket pocket gave me the nerve to hike up to a stranger's house.

The entire place was surrounded by an eight foot tall cyclone fence, and the gate was padlocked. I rattled the fence and waited for a herd of guard dogs to come bounding down to eat me. When nothing happened, I scrambled over the top and continued up the hill.

If Ernie's place was messy, Mr. Scruffy's could only be described as lunar. It had been a

pretty place a few years back when I'd hiked through the area. But that was before anyone lived there . . . before the trailer. From a vantage point behind some granite boulders, I could see that the long, wispy needles of the surrounding digger pines that might have provided some shade were rust-colored and tinder dry. Most of the vegetation was scorched and parched. The stain of death extended downhill along the drainage courses that lead to a seasonal creek. A funny smell was in the air.

Scruffy's car was nosed in close to the trailer, but there was no sign of life. I had to catch myself—I almost called out a warning, the way polite people do in the country when they approach a house unannounced. I circled halfway around the edge of the clearing and didn't hear anything except the breeze in the trees. I still couldn't peg the smell.

Dozens of small animal pelts were stretched out to dry on one of the trailer walls. Rabbits, probably.

When I got to the far side, I saw him. Scruffy was sitting on a stump in the shadows, staring at me wide-eyed. I froze like a deer, but unlike a deer I didn't have the advantage of protective camouflage. When I realized this, I threw myself be-

hind a rock and waited, expecting a full assault at any moment. When none came, I chanced a peek. Scruffy hadn't moved. He didn't blink. He didn't breathe. He was dead.

Up close I could see that the hair on his head was singed away and there were burn marks on his clothes and face. He'd been dead a few hours—long enough for rigor mortis to set in but not long enough for any decomposition.

The back end of the trailer was gone. Jagged metal shards twisted in a sunburst pattern around the edge of the gaping hole. A drug lab? What else could have caused the explosion? Scruffy must have been cooking up a batch of methamphetamine, speed, crank—whatever they were calling it these days—and it got away from him. Survived the blast, walked outside, sat down and died.

What was that old song lyric . . . one toke over the line?

I left him where he was.

I used the pay phone at Big Bud's General Store to call Sheriff Wyler and had a few beers while I waited.

Wyler and Dunne, his deputy, checked out the situation and spent several hours questioning me and everyone else who lived along our road or who

happened into the store. They went up to Hank MacAdam's to get his version of things, but no one was home. And everyone thought that was strange, since his big Caddy was parked in the carport where it was supposed to be and he didn't have any other vehicles except for the heavy equipment.

When the fingerprint dust settled, Wyler had a murder case against Mr. Scruffy, the dope cooker, whose real name, I learned, was Beaudean Scutt—a man with the proverbial mile-long rap sheet. He'd used a two-handed grip on the axe, which left a beautiful set of prints, when he parted Ernie's hair for her.

The reason for their fatal disagreement was strictly a matter of theory, since there were no survivors, but it must have involved either the road paving or the cats. The pelts on Scruffy's trailer wall turned out to be catskins, most likely from some of Ernie's wandering wards. Or maybe Ernie discovered Scruffy cooking up his secret recipe and had to be silenced. It hardly matters now.

And old Hank MacAdam... his beloved paving still hasn't gone in. As acting presi-

dent I haven't been acting much. The association just sort of fell apart without Hank's nagging leadership. The only patch of paving still runs down my driveway and across the road to Ernie's, or more correctly, to my other place. Ernie willed it to me, along with custody of the cats. I'm still trying to decide whether she did me much of a favor with either of those bequests.

And Hank MacAdam? Wyler hasn't got a clue to his whereabouts, but I've got an opinion I've been keeping to myself. Remember back on the day we laid the blacktop when I asked old Ernie about Hank? When she said, "It's all on Hank MacAdam," she wasn't talking about the expense. I think she was talking about the truckload of blacktop—macadam on MacAdam, if you're feeling punny.

Of course, that's just a hunch, and I'm not the impetuous type. Besides, I've been enjoying the peace and quiet, not to mention my super smooth driveway, too much to help Sheriff Wyler dig any deeper into his missing persons case, especially if it involves heavy equipment.



# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



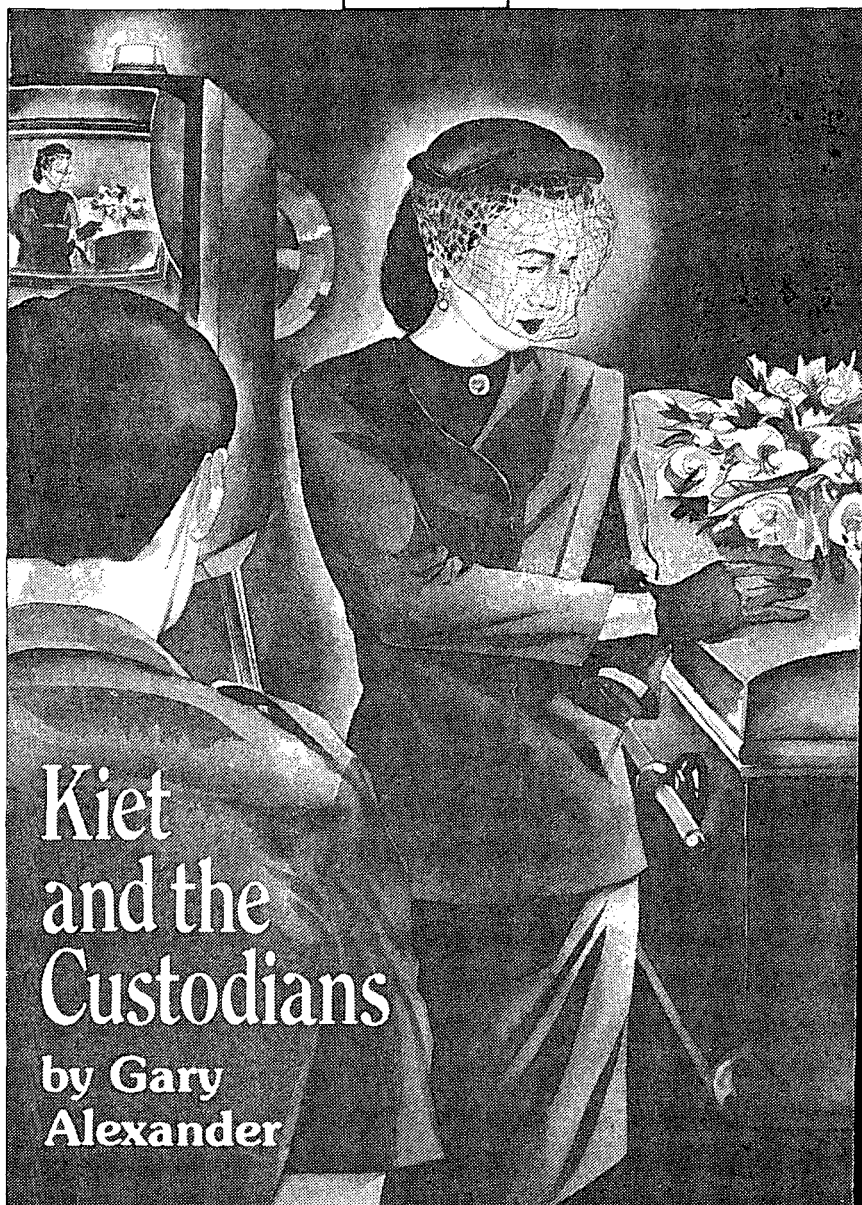
Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Wall boys. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

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The winning entry for the Mid-December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

FICTION



# Kiet and the Custodians

by Gary  
Alexander

*Illustration by Bradley H. Clark*

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The funeral party prepared to file past the closed coffin, to pay final respects to the deceased. Monique, the widow, led the procession, cloaked and veiled in black. The dead man was her fifth husband, and nobody believed for a minute that she wasn't responsible for his murder.

"That is not her husband inside that box," said Bamsan Kiet, superintendent of police of Hickorn, capital city of the Kingdom of Luong.

"Is that the detective or the habitual viewer speaking?" said his lover, Quin Canh.

"I am *not* an habitual viewer. They can't kill off Monique's husband," Kiet said. "He is nearly as evil as she."

"Will we ever know? The ceremony is closed coffin because the killer butchered his face so badly with an axe," Quin said.

"We shall see if we watch," said Kiet, hinting for silence.

They were at his home, staring at *Deathless Love*. A double misnomer, thought Kiet. The show was anything but deathless, as characters constantly attempted to shoot, stab, bludgeon, and poison one another, often successfully. "Love" ran the gamut of lust, heavily favoring adultery, and frequently in conjunction with the mayhem.

*Deathless Love* was Luong's favorite soap opera. Monique, playing the bitch-goddess character of the same name, was a Eurasian and Luong's favorite actress. Sobbing hysterically, she wrenched free of the grip of her brother-in-law, with whom she was having an affair, and threw herself on the coffin.

"I knew it," Kiet said. "The coffin will be opened."

"Why are you so involved in this trash? Doesn't your work provide enough daily misery?"

"And who are you to talk?" he asked Quin, a nurse and instructor of nursing at the Luong University.

"I am indulging you. I would rather be reading."

The give and take was goodnatured. They were eating rice cakes, Kiet drinking Golden Tiger beer, Quin a glass of tea, snuggling on Kiet's sofa.

"Hah," Kiet said. "You gripe at the commercials as well as the show."

"So should you. You are also a nonsmoker."

This soap opera was not sponsored by detergents. Hickorn's distributor of American cigarettes picked up the full bill. Kiet shrugged and said, "I cannot change people's habits, Quin. Unless



I put them in jail. And you do not object so strongly that you boycott the show."

"I close my eyes during the commercials."

"Face the facts, my love. *Deathless Love* is a national addiction that cannot be—"

"Shhh! Monique is unlatching the coffin."

She was indeed, despite protestations from the deceased's former business partner, who had been the second party in one of Monique's aborted pregnancies.

"I was right. The coffin will be opened. Now who might actually be in it?"

"Bamsan, please shut up."

"We can rule out the priest. They would not go that far. Would they? A better possibility is the lawyer Monique was blackmail—ow!"

Kiet massaged his elbowed ribs. Quin said, "Look, she's unfastened the other latch."

Kiet leaned forward, craning his neck, his subconscious stretching for an advance peek into the casket. Quin, half on his lap, equaled his height advantage, but the nineteen inch black and white portable would reveal the secret at its own pace.

Monique threw open the coffin. Her veil flew off, revealing full, anguished lips and stratospheric cheekbones. Kiet suppressed a sigh.

An ample body completely filled the coffin.

"Bamsan, that's too big to be her husband. Can you make out his face?"

"Not very well, Quin. He looks Caucasian, doesn't he?"

"He does."

"And he looks familiar. Are there Westerners in the cast? I do not recall any."

"There aren't, except for Monique, who is half French."

Monique, meanwhile, was covering her eyes and screaming. Kiet said, "For a mediocre actress, she is doing a great job."

"Bamsan, I don't think she's acting."

The camera jerked and swung away from the coffin, past the actors, to a bare wall, where a wide-eyed man with headphones said in a quavering voice, "Help, police. Come quickly."

The Kingdom of Luong does not exist. It is an imaginary Southeast Asian backwater surrounded by Laos, Burma, China, and Thailand. Nevertheless, Superintendent Kiet had a job to do. He

groaned, kissed Quin on the cheek, and trudged off to the television station.

Prince Novisad Pakse, eighty-one-year-old ruler of Luong, has no military juggernaut or trade surplus with which to hammer out foreign policy. His only diplomatic tool is whimsy: he names and renames streets in downtown Hickorn in honor of political leaders, past and present. A tightening of economic aid from China, for example, could cause a redesignation of Avenue Li Peng to Avenue Chiang Kai-shek. And a sudden increase in assistance from Taiwan.

On the relatively neutral intersection of Rue Boris Yeltsin and Avenue John F. Kennedy is Luong's lone TV station—Channel Seven. When Kiet arrived, the locale was swarming with people. In the mob were Hickorn police department officers, some uniformed, some not. Among the policemen was his adjutant, Captain Binh.

Binh quickstepped to him and said breathlessly, "Superintendent, you heard. You must have been watching *Deathless Love*, too."

"I was informed there was a problem at the station," Kiet said vaguely.

"Problem is an understatement," Binh said. "Murder is the operative word."

The lean young Binh was dressed impeccably in whites. Street lights reflected on his patent leather shoes and holster and glinted in the three golden captain's pips on his shoulder boards. Kiet, a tall meaty man of middle age, was a shambling figure in slacks, white shirt, and sandals. The superintendent and his second-in-command were physical opposites.

"Captain, the men in uniform are looking at us nervously. Some are leaving."

"Right, superintendent. They're the guys on duty."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, you know, they were all somewhere or another watching the show, and that's a no-no when you're on duty, right?"

"Yes."

"The guy calling out for help on camera was the director. They responded to his plea out of instinct."

"Commendable," Kiet said unenthusiastically.

"But now they're thinking about their careers."

"Understandable. So our investigative team will be a sleepy collection of off-duty officers?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Splendid. The murder?"

"You'll never guess who," Binh said, leading Kiet into the television station.

Kiet paused and wiped his brow. He had passed from a balmy Hickorn evening of eighty-five degrees and eighty percent humidity to an inferno. Channel Seven's innards had been a gift surplussed by a public broadcasting station in the American province of South Dakota that had switched to a modern color system. The donated equipment had been manufactured before transistors and microchips; vacuum tubes generated the heat of a blast furnace.

"Hotter'n a two-dollar pistol, huh, superintendent?" Binh said, fanning himself with his cap.

Binh had studied police science in America for a year, at their District of Columbia constabulary. Besides wondrous tales of V-8 powered squad cars, plea bargaining, and sting operations, he had packed home a quantity of American slang, all of it excess baggage as far as Kiet was concerned.

"The murder victim, please?"

"Dicky Monroe," Binh said.

"Of Luong Distributing, Limited? I thought I recognized him."

"The same, superintendent. The exclusive wholesaler of American cigarettes in the country. The richest foreigner in Luong. And Monique's his live-in squeeze. *And* he turns up in a coffin on a soap opera set, deader'n a doornail. Go figure."

"Go figure what?" Kiet said.

"Who killed him," Binh said, entering the inner studio.

It had been vacated but for a yawning out-of-uniform officer guarding the coffin and the director. Behind the coffin was a sheet of plywood mounted on casters. Painted on the plywood was a cemetery scene of tombstones and greenery. Kiet remembered that a cigarette commercial separated the funeral home scene from the cemetery scene. He was shocked at the cheesiness of the special effects. Show business, he thought.

Binh asked the director, "Who was supposed to be in the coffin?"

Perhaps Monique's race car driver boyfriend who was being blackmailed by her third husband's accountant, Kiet speculated.

"Nobody," said the director.

"Nobody?" Kiet and Binh said in unison, the latter adding,

"I'd've laid money on Monique's fourth husband's twin brother. He was getting ready to cause trouble."

"Nobody," the director repeated. "Monique's fifth husband didn't die from the axing. He was rescued by Monique's nice sister, his true love. He'll have plastic surgery and, of course, other plot complications."

"Amnesia?" Kiet asked.

"How did you know?" asked the director.

"Never mind. Who had access to the coffin?"

"Everybody. We set up the scene last night so we could rehearse this afternoon. We shoot *Love* live."

"No one looked inside it?"

"No one had reason to," said the director.

Binh sniffed. "They would pretty soon."

"Mr. Monroe's access to the studio?"

The director shrugged. "Unlimited. He is our sole sponsor."

"When was he last seen on the set?"

"Yesterday, just prior to shooting. He left before the episode began."

"Dressed as he is now?"

"I believe so."

"Enemies?"

"Just the Custodians, those anti-smoking radicals. Believe me, they are capable of murder."

The Custodians was an ultrasecret organization that protested the sale of American cigarettes in Luong. "Custodians" was a shortening of Custodians for Public Health. Their tactic was vandalism, their principal weapon aerosol spray paint. Kiet did not think a loose confederation of cranks was capable of murder. "I meant enemies in the *Deathless Love* cast and crew."

"I should not speak ill of the dead."

"Yes, you should," Kiet advised him.

"Like most Westerners, Mr. Monroe could be loud and aggressive and boorish."

"Who might wish to permanently shut his loud mouth?"

The director shook his head. "No person known to me, superintendent. Besides, Mr. Monroe and Monique were sweethearts. Monique adored him. She would tolerate no bad talk. She would have the person fired. Mr. Monroe had powerful friends, too. Anybody with a brain would keep their feelings to themselves."

"Where is Monique?"



"She was taken home in shock."

Binh had wandered to the coffin, and was bending over, peering at a balding and unnaturally-white white man of Kiet's height, girth, and age. "Cologne heavy enough to still be smelled, Rolex watch, dark slacks, monogrammed white shirt. The uniform of a Far East carpetbagger," Binh narrated. "Hey, superintendent, there are no signs of force. I think Dicky Monroe may have been poisoned. Come here and scope him out."

Kiet fuzzed his eyes out of focus and nodded. The superintendent's most private secret was his aversion to death and gore. A lawman who became ill at the sight of violence was a useless sissy. A street urchin would laugh in his face. "Yes, I can tell from here."

"Wait," Binh said, lifting Monroe's head and feeling one side of it. "What is this? A lump and a scab. He was conked on the noggin. Not hard enough to kill him, however. He was knocked out. No blood. He was whacked out and brought here, superintendent."

"I agree," Kiet said, gazing at his blurred adjutant.

"I don't smell almonds on his breath and his lips aren't blue, so it wasn't cyanide. In D.C., we routinely checked for those symptoms when answering a squeal on a suspected poisoning. Wow, how did I miss this! I guess it was underneath his forearm."

"Excuse me?"

Binh carefully took one of Monroe's arms by the wrist and lifted it. Impaled just below his grip was a syringe. He said, "Half full of a clear fluid, superintendent. What do you imagine it is?"

"We will find out, en route to pay our respects to the grieving Monique."

**T**he Hickorn Police Department has no crime laboratory. The city's occasional homicide is usually straightforward, a hotheaded and bungled act a *Deathless Love* viewer could appreciate. A love triangle reducing the field to two. A barroom brawl concerning a pittance of money or honor. Stupidity, bloodied hands, smoking guns, and regret.

Murders of foreigners, however, inevitably involved politics and business. The crimes were committed with shades of subtlety or inscrutability, as in the case of Dicky Monroe's syringe. These killings were always a mess, always a headache. Outside forensic assistance was normally required.

Kiet and Binh sought it the next day, delivering the syringe to Healthful Pharmacy and Supply for identification. The druggist

was a frail, intense man who wore thick glasses and a smock decorated with unpleasant stains. His name was Quong Dang. He told Kiet he had a hunch about the substance and to return in an hour.

They drove toward the International District, a residential enclave of sprawling villas composed of gingerbread stucco, red roof tile, and lush gardens. Western and Japanese entrepreneurs were neighbors with Hickorn's wealthiest citizenry. Privacy was maintained by fences of imported stone, wrought iron, and topiary.

"Superintendent, did you ever meet Dicky Monroe?"

"No, but I saw him a number of times being chauffeured in his Cadillac."

"Yeah, Hickorn's only Caddy," Binh said. "Gold-plated ornaments, wire wheels, a mile long. Talk about a land yacht. Dicky was tacky, but he knew how to turn heads. A good ol' boy, through and through. They say he was a southern boy, Alabama or somewhere, a drifter and a hustler. They say he didn't have diddly-squat till he began peddling American cigarettes in Asia. He had a piece of Bangkok distributorship and got in on the ground floor here in Hickorn. Do you suppose Monique saw anything in him except his millions?"

"Highly doubtful."

"What a fox! We're talking eleven on a scale of ten."

Binh and his slang. "You are admiring her beauty?"

"Does a bear live in the woods?"

"Not in Luongan woods. Luongan jungles have no bears."

Binh sighed. "You know what I mean. Monique is the prettiest woman in the world, right?"

"She is attractive, yes."

"Anyway, it's no secret Monroe had Minister of Commerce Vo in his pocket. He's hung onto exclusive rights to sell American tobacco products in Luong long enough to amass a fortune. I wonder what happens now in that regard."

"Perhaps that was and is the killer's thinking."

"You know, superintendent, there's going to be a ton of pressure to pin this on the Custodians."

"A protester with a spray can committing murder? Nonsense."

"Well, that was my initial feeling, too, but they're getting more and more militant. They overspray billboards just as fast as they're cleaned up. Americans are giving up the habit, and the tobacco companies are pushing hard in Asia."

"With the backing of U.S. trade officials who threaten sanctions.

Deny yourselves our cigarettes, and we shall deny ourselves your exports."

"Yeah, that's what has the Custodians up in arms. Somebody, maybe acting alone, flipped, went off the deep end."

"Perhaps."

Kiet had posted police officers at Dicky Monroe's villa to discourage the curious. A pair in front saluted and swung ornate iron gates open for their car. They parked in a circular courtyard, and a red-eyed maid clutching a handkerchief escorted them inside. They were led to the living room and asked to please wait.

The room was larger than most Luongan houses. Ceiling fans paddled slabs of warm air, providing some ventilation. The furniture was hardwood and velour, heavy and dark. Mounted on the walls, one after another, were animal heads: deer, panthers, Indochinese tigers.

"Mr. Monroe was a sportsman," Kiet muttered.

"In his own estimation," said the unmistakable voice behind them. "Gentlemen, please be seated."

Kiet and Binh obeyed. Monique sat primly on the edge of the sofa opposite them. Binh's lower jaw hung, and his eyes strained against their sockets. He was already catatonic. Kiet was more composed, although his pulse had accelerated to a dangerous rate.

Monique Duvalier was the twenty-five-year-old issue of a brief marriage between a Luongan socialite—lovely in her own right—and a playboy French journalist who commuted to Hickory while covering the Vietnam War. A classic Luongan beauty, her Gallic genes were a mere seasoning, an exotic dash of green eyes and freckles.

Her long black hair was tied back severely. She wore no makeup. A baggy silk robe ran from neck to ankle. Mourning did not diminish her, thought Kiet; it softened the villainous Monique of television. He apologized for the intrusion and said questions were unfortunately necessary.

"Do not apologize, Superintendent Kiet. I want the killer punished a thousand times more than you do. How did he die? It was so awful seeing him—like that."

"We are investigating the cause of death. Who might have killed Mr. Monroe?"

"Enemies? Many people are envious of a man as successful as Dicky, as they are envious of me."

"Business rivals? Personal animosities?"

"Dicky had no competition in his business, so he had no rivals. People who resented him did so silently. I am not telling you how to do your job, but if I were you I would be arresting Custodian leaders and interrogating them. I do not myself smoke. Cigarettes harshen the voice and cause premature wrinkling. In my business that would not do. But those antismoking zealots disgust me, sneaking around, defacing property. They are your prime suspects."

"Thank you for the excellent advice," Kiet said. "When did you last see Mr. Monroe alive, please?"

"He was at the set day before yesterday. He left just prior to shooting."

"He did not come home?"

Monique hesitated. "He could have, late, after I was asleep. I am a sound sleeper. Dicky often rose early in the morning to go to his office. He did not require much sleep."

"Do you know where he went when he left the studio?"

"No. We did not write itineraries for each other."

"This probably is not relevant, but you said that Mr. Monroe was a sportsman 'in his own estimation.' Would you explain that?"

"If Dicky wanted something, he took it. He wanted those animals as trophies, so he shot them and displayed them on the walls. He possesses things."

"Does he possess people, too?"

Monique forced a thin smile. "Things, people. No difference. But I know what you are implying. He did not possess me. Nobody possesses Monique."

"I thought we handled Monique pretty damn well, superintendent." Binh had recovered his wits sufficiently to drive them from the Monroe villa to Healthful Pharmacy and Supply. Kiet did not reply. "She's one cool customer, isn't she?"

"She is, yes."

"I was studying her body language while you grilled her. I read her as stunned at the murder and what it does to her situation rather than being bummed out, you know, saddened."

"I agree."

"But did she zap Monroe?"

"Were you watching *Deathless Love* when Monique threw open the coffin?"

"Uh, well, as night commander I was up to my neck in pa-

perwork, but there are a couple of TV's at headquarters that I didn't exactly know were on but were, and I overheard the guys yelling and I sort of peeked out of the corner of my eye at the tail end of it."

Kiet suppressed a groan. "Have you an opinion of her performance?"

"Monique's acting ability isn't gonna win her any Oscars. She about came out of her shoes when she took a squint at Dicky. She didn't know he'd be in the casket. She was for real."

Kiet again agreed. They reached the pharmacy. Quong Dang invited them into his office. On the desk was the syringe, now empty. Next to it was a dish that contained a small puddle of oily brown liquid. Dang said, "I should have identified it immediately. I mix pesticides and sell them to gardeners and farmers. This stuff is part of my recipe."

"Okay, what is the brown stuff?" Binh asked.

"The contents of your syringe turned brown when exposed to the air."

"What, please, turned brown when exposed to the air?"

"Nicotine," said Dang.

Kiet and Binh were speechless.

"Rumors in Hickory multiply and spread like the bugs my customers try to kill. Is it true this needle was stuck in Dicky Monroe's arm?"

Kiet held a finger to his lips.

"Fear not, superintendent. I am the epitome of discretion. This is between the three of us. Who did this to the poor man?"

Kiet shook his head.

"Whoever did was careless with the murder weapon, weren't they? Too careless if you ask me. If they had immobilized him, they could have killed him by applying it to his skin. Pure nicotine is extremely toxic and readily absorbed. They could have given you a mystery poison to solve instead of handing you the solution."

Kiet thanked Dang and instructed him to send a bill. He and Binh walked outside, where a billboard above a storefront across the street caught their attention.

It was an advertisement for a popular brand of American cigarettes. The setting was a beach of white sand and palm trees. Young, yellow-haired, blue-eyed models with skin suntanned darker than a Luongan's posed in skimpy swimsuits, the advertiser's cigarettes in their hands and mouths. The men's biceps and

the women's chests bulged. Everybody seemed gloriously happy.

The idyllic scene was marred by black spray paint, however. Skulls were outlined on faces. Crossbones x-ed necks. "DEATH" was overlaid on the cigarette's brand name.

"Well," Binh said.

"Indeed," Kiet said.

"You know, superintendent, I don't recall ever busting a Custodian. Hell, we don't even know who their leader is."

Kiet said, "I have a feeling we will be reminded of that very soon."

Upon his return to headquarters, Kiet was given an urgent message to report to Minister of Commerce Chuong Vo. He obeyed at his own speed and in a foul humor.

The Ministry of Commerce was located on Avenue George Bush, close by the Royal Palace, in a thicket of ministries and embassies. An unimpressive three stories of cracked stucco and arched windows, the structure had been dedicated in 1954, one week after the fall of Dien Bien Phu and less than one year before Luong was granted independence by France.

The French had intended it as a rural development agency, but the Vietminh victory cooled their interest. Colonial civil servants began looking into steamship schedules and postings in Algeria. The natives themselves or the barefoot Marxists could tend to rural development, thank you.

Communist hordes never invaded, but a Luongan bureaucracy did, Kiet thought as he climbed the stairs to the top floor. The building seemed to him to creak under the weight of documents and clerks.

He was shown in to Minister of Commerce Chuong Vo, who already had a guest. "Kiet, have you apprehended the killer yet?" Vo said in lieu of a salutation and an introduction.

Vo was in his forties and as round as he was tall. He wore rimless glasses and his hair slicked straight back. He and his companion were dressed identically—in navy suit, white shirt, and navy tie. The costume of an American sociopolitical cult known as Republican, Kiet observed. He said, "Momentarily, sir."

"You're zeroing in on their hideout, I assume."

"Excuse me?"

"The Custodians. That's where you can expect their ringleaders to be holed up."

"Oh yes," Kiet said. "Indeed."

"You can't bring those animals to justice soon enough for me," said Vo's guest, who stood from a chair next to Vo's desk and extended his hand.

"Hi, I'm Vance Popkirk."

Kiet accepted a firm, dry handshake. Popkirk had yellow hair, blue eyes, a suntan, and a winning smile. His hair was beginning to thin and streak gray, and excessive solar exposure had etched lines on boyish cheeks and around bright, earnest eyes. He could have been an older brother to the euphoric beach smokers on the billboards.

"Vance is a special assistant for trade," Vo explained. "We're coordinating different things."

"A special assistant to whom, please, if I may ask?"

Popkirk said, "Special assistant assigned to Luong, out of Bangkok."

Kiet sensed a long and meaningless job title. "Forgive my ignorance, but I do not understand your function."

"Kiet," Vo said.

"No problem," Popkirk said, smile frozen. He gave Kiet a business card. Popkirk was Special Assistant to the Deputy Assistant Undersecretary for Trade, Far East.

"I see," said Kiet, who didn't.

"Listen, Kiet," Chuong Vo said. "Vance and I were personal friends of Dicky Monroe's. I expect you to keep us informed regarding progress on the case. I asked you here to make that request."

Kiet said nothing.

"Do you have a problem with that?" Vo demanded.

"Just out of conjecture, to explore every possibility, including greed, as a motive, could you tell me whether Mr. Monroe had business rivals who may—"

"Kiet, why are you avoiding the obvious?" Chuong Vo interrupted. "The Custodians injected Dicky with nicotine."

Kiet shut his eyes and thought of Dang, the pharmacist. *I am the epitome of discretion.*

He finally said, "Conjecture on my part, mere conjecture. Please indulge me for a minute. I understand that Mr. Monroe had exclusive rights to sell American cigarettes in Luong. Might not someone else covet his profits? If Monroe is gone, he must be replaced."

"I granted him the first license because he had experience in exporting tobacco to Southeast Asia," Vo said. "I have been ac-



cepting applications and have been planning to issue additional import licenses by the end of the year. The trade has grown too large for one company to monopolize. There are a dozen applicants to date, and my intentions are common knowledge. They would have no motive."

Multiple import licenses, Kiet thought; multiple kickbacks. "In the interim, what happens to Luong Distributing?"

"I'll field that question, Chuong," Popkirk said. "My job is to promote U.S.-Luong trade. Tobacco is our number-one export to you. Consequently, I got to know Dicky and Minister Vo well. Dicky had no heirs I was aware of except ex-wives. They aren't entitled to his estate under Luongan law. I made a request to the U.S. Embassy for further dope on Dicky. They had no data, positive or negative."

"So who is entitled to his assets?" Kiet asked. "Monique?"

"No," Vo said. "They weren't married. In the absence of legal heirs, the estate will revert to the Luongan treasury, less transfer costs."

A kickback surcharge? "Transfer costs paid to whom?"

"Personal property directly to the treasury. Inventory and monies connected to the sale of cigarettes to the Ministry of Commerce. My ministry is responsible for all imports and exports. Listen, Kiet, I have indulged you far longer than your minute. I said what I wanted to say, and now you're wasting our time. I suggest you leave and track down the Custodians."

Kiet ignored Vo and said to Vance Popkirk, "Sir, American policy on their cigarettes puzzles me. Your Surgeon General condemns them, yet under the threat of trade barriers your various foreign trade bureaus bully Asian nations into selling them. Is that not a contradiction?"

"Kiet," Vo said.

Smiling congenially, Popkirk raised a hand. "Chuong, no problem. That's easy, Superintendent Kiet. No contradiction. Different agencies have different policies."

Kiet could not summon a response. Popkirk's logic was alarmingly Luongan.

"Heart disease, lung cancer, throat cancer, emphysema," Popkirk continued, ticking the diseases off on his fingers. "What is the average life expectancy in Luong?"

"I don't know."

"According to a recent study, a relatively-youthful fifty-four

years. The average Luongan will die of other causes before he succumbs to alleged tobacco-related disorders," Popkirk said cheerily.

"Thank you for considering our national health," Kiet said. "I am happy to learn that I have four average years left to live."

"Have you ever smoked an Emerald Queen?" Popkirk asked, shuddering.

"Once. An adolescent experiment with smoking." He knew the point Popkirk was making. Emerald Queen cigarettes were made in Hickorn. They smelled like a car fire and were said to be more carcinogenic than plutonium.

"Then you know what I'm talking about. We're doing you a favor. Besides, if you didn't smoke our cigarettes, you'd smoke somebody else's."

"Mr. Popkirk, when did you last see Mr. Monroe alive?"

"Kiet!" Vo screamed.

"It's okay, Chuong. It's okay. The superintendent is just doing his job, covering all the bases. What was it, the day before the murder?"

"Two days," Vo said grimly.

"Two days before," Popkirk said. "Chuong and I had lunch with him."

"How did Mr. Monroe feel about the issuance of additional licenses?"

"Get out, Kiet," Vo said.

"Dicky didn't mind," Popkirk said. "He's on the ground floor. He'd still have made plenty of money."

Kiet got up.

Popkirk laughed and said, "Custodians. Sounds like a gang of school janitors."

**"S**uperintendent, we've arrested a Custodian, and he's confessed to murdering Dicky Monroe."

"Who is he?"

"An old geezer named Totisa Wu. A patrolman nailed him red-handed, spraying a sandwich-board cigarette sign outside a grocery."

"Where is he?" Kiet asked Binh.

"In your office. I wanted him isolated and mum's the word. I've seen him, though. I know I have. I have the officer who arrested him guarding him. We'll send him out to check for a rap sheet."

Kiet related his conversation with Vo and Popkirk.

"Superintendent, we really have to think about using another druggist as a toxic substances consultant. Quong Dang has a big mouth. He ought to go for a new career, as a town crier."

Kiet walked into his office, congratulated the officer on his fine work, and dispatched him to Records. Totisa Wu was elderly, a stick man of bony limbs and leathery skin. His remaining teeth were stained reddish-black from a lifetime of chewing betel nut. Kiet thought he had seen the man before, too.

"A killer, are you?" Kiet said.

Totisa Wu held up skeletal fists. "With these two hands. He deserved to die, and I deserve to die for my crime."

"Why did you kill him?" Binh asked.

"I am a Custodian. Monroe sold death."

"Tell us about the Custodians."

"What is there to tell?"

"Where and when do you gather for meetings? Who is your leader?"

"I am the leader."

"Where do you meet?"

"Here and there," Wu said.

"Splendid," Kiet said. "Where and how did you kill Mr. Monroe?"

"I strangled him in an alley and carried him to Channel Seven and dumped him in the coffin." Wu cackled. "I love a good practical joke."

"You have to be a whole lot stronger than you look, Pops," Binh said. "Dicky Monroe was a big boy."

Wu flexed a puny bicep. "He put up a tremendous fight."

"Either he's shucking us, superintendent, making us dig the particulars out of him, or he's the only person in Hickorn who doesn't know about the you-know-what with the you-know-what in it that turns you-know-what-color when exposed to air. A little birdie's whispering in my ear that we've been had."

The officer returned with a file folder. Kiet perused the contents and asked, "How is Miss Earhart?"

"Huh?" Binh said.

"As well as can be expected," Totisa Wu said, rocking a palm. "Like me, she's getting up in years."

"Mr. Wu is hiding Amelia Earhart," Kiet told Binh. "He rescued her from the Japanese during World War II and is holding her against her will. Last October fifteenth, he came to headquarters

and generously offered to release her to the desk sergeant and plead guilty to kidnapping."

"The offer stands," Wu said.

"You also visited us on March twenty-first."

"He's available, too. I had to shoot three of them to take him off the ship."

"Ship?" Binh asked.

"Spaceship," Kiet clarified.

"Is it murder to kill an alien? I confess to three counts."

"Do I dare ask who's available?" Binh said, thoroughly deflated.

"Elvis."

"Yeah," Binh said. "Why not?"

A week passed and they had made no headway. They interviewed every member of the *Deathless Love* company. They canvassed the areas surrounding Channel Seven and the Monroe villa. Nothing. Kiet was amazed that he still had a job.

They released crazy Wu, and for a couple of days a rumor persisted that he *was* guilty, exonerated by a bribe. Wu squelched that story himself when he claimed that the Monroe he strangled was not Dicky but Marilyn.

Although there was no public outcry against them, the Custodians stopped vandalizing cigarette advertising. Nobody much cared about a dead rich American. Nobody cared that some fanatics had jabbed him in the arm with a poisoned needle. They *did* care that their beloved/hated Monique was in seclusion and that *Deathless Love* was without her. Since the killer of her man had sent her into mourning, Kiet and the Custodians (presumably) realized that matters were powder keg sensitive.

Monique renewed impetus to the case by sending word to Kiet that she wished to see him as soon as possible and in strictest confidence. He went that evening, timing his visit with the beginning of *Deathless Love*. Viewership had dropped in Monique's absence, but Hickorn's streets were still deserted, and the Hickorn police officers guarding the Monroe villa clustered around the bluish glow emitted by tiny battery-powered televisions.

Monique greeted him in a slit Suzy Wong skirt. Kiet did not believe she was in seduction garb, but he nonetheless saw spots and lost most feeling in his knees. She managed to navigate him to the living room. A maid served tea.

"I thank you for coming so promptly, Superintendent Kiet. I asked to see you to inquire how your investigation is proceeding. I am most anxious to have Dicky's killer brought to justice."

"Frankly, we have no solid suspects."

"There was an old man, a Custodian."

"A crazy old man. He's probably gone off in a flying saucer by now."

Monique Duvalièr smiled. "You are continuing to hunt Custodians?"

Blood had resumed pumping to Kiet's brain, and his respiration was almost normal. "Miss, despite your isolation I am confident you have already heard answers to your questions. Hickorn gossip permeates walls like tropical humidity."

Monique's smile was unchanging. "Do I have another motive for bringing you here?"

"Do you? You said you were anxious to have Mr. Monroe's killer brought to justice. You did not say that you were anxious to learn his identity."

"Are those not two separate things?" she said innocently.

"Depending on a person's store of information."

"Am I a suspect?"

"Anybody not accompanying Mr. Totisa Wu on his flying saucer is a suspect, Custodian or non-Custodian. I do not really suspect you. I do feel you might have inadvertently withheld vital information when we last spoke. You were under a tremendous strain."

"I will cooperate as best as I can. That is my primary motive for bringing you here. I did not love Dicky. I liked him. I sincerely want his killer to rot in jail."

"Did Mr. Monroe bequeath you money and property?"

"A special will? Swiss bank accounts? A written partnership in his tobacco business? No, no, and no. You would faint if I divulged how much money *Deathless Love* pays me. Dicky's money is meaningless to me. I'll move out of the villa before I'm pressured. Or I'll buy it."

"Your attraction to Mr. Monroe, please?"

"Why was I attracted to a loud, obnoxious white man twice my age? Dicky was fun. Like me, he loved to be seen. We had something in common, superintendent. We were rich and famous, and we loved it."

Kiet withdrew his notebook. "I need to clarify times. You last saw Mr. Monroe alive on—"

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"No. I will not reply. Haven't you covered that ground endlessly? Haven't you asked everybody where they were when?"

An actress lecturing *him* on criminal detection procedures? Kiet flushed and said, "Repetition is an effective interviewing technique. People remember what they had previously forgotten."

"Withholding vital information?" she said, hinting at a smile.

"Yes."

"Those who intentionally withhold, you trip them up on the second interrogation?"

"One can hope."

"Sorry, but I have no vital information. I do have vital advice."

"For which I will be grateful," Kiet lied.

"Concentrate on what isn't rather than what is."

"Thank you for the riddle."

"No riddle," said Monique Duvalier. "I didn't give you a riddle. I gave you a pathway."

**K**iet was no less puzzled by Monique's riddle-pathway when he arrived at Channel Seven. *Deathless Love* had just concluded and the final commercial was playing. Sponsor messages were also shot live. Two pretty young women clothed in plastic facsimiles of cigarette packages were singing the praises of lower tar's not sacrificing loss of flavor. They were dancing to their music, bare legs kicking high, their faces glistening with perspiration.

Kiet became extremely warm just looking at the poor, tortured girls. He caught the director's eye and motioned him outside.

"How is your investigation proceeding, superintendent?"

"A familiar question. How is *Deathless Love* proceeding?"

"Without Monique, terribly. In terms of story line, we can't develop a believable criminal conspiracy or a home-wrecking situation unless Monique instigates it. Viewership is holding fairly steady, but unless she returns soon we're in trouble."

"A Luong Distributing commercial," Kiet said, cocking a thumb toward the studio.

"They're paid up to the end of the week. I don't know what we'll do for a sponsor afterward. I talked to Monique today, superintendent. She was vague about her return. I can't honestly state how she really felt about Dicky. I do know that she wants vengeance,

and I don't think she'll come back to *Love* until you have your killer."

"We are making progress," Kiet said. "Is Monique a truthful person?"

The director looked at him. "She is. You are not suggesting that she was involved, are you?"

"No, I am not. When you make an inquiry and her answer is, shall we say, obscure, is she telling the truth?"

"Monique can be manipulative, and she is a master at indirection. But she is basically honest. Superintendent, answer me a truthful question, will you?"

"Perhaps," Kiet said truthfully.

"How did Dicky die?"

"You saw Captain Binh lift his arm," Kiet said.

"I saw the syringe," the director said. "Everybody in Hickorn knows he was poisoned. What kind of poison?"

"Isn't rather than is," Kiet said, snapping fingers. "Isn't rather than is."

The director was not certain what he had heard. Bamsan Kiet was already walking away from him.

"Superintendent, it's late."

"Captain, what isn't rather than is?"

"Uh, is that a riddle?"

"No. It is a pathway. What isn't rather than is?"

"Superintendent, have you been hitting the sauce? You know how Quin hates it when you drink."

"Artists, captain, painters, as they compose their paintings, they consider the negative space."

"Well, it's been a slow night," Binh said, getting out of his chair. "I can drive you home. I'll turn the place over to the desk sergeant for a few minutes."

"A slow night. Splendid," Kiet said. "Must see several spare officers. I have a project for us."

"Uh, yeah, scouring the countryside for what isn't, right?"

"Captain, what is as large as an aircraft carrier, gaudier than a whore's trousseau, rolls on rubber wheels, and is missing?"

"Uh-oh. 'Isn't' as in 'isn't anywhere in sight'?"

"Indeed. 'Isn't' as in 'missing.'"

"Holy Moley," Binh said, snapping the fingers of one hand, slapping himself on the side of the head with the other.



A maid showed Kiet and Binh into the Monroe-Duvalier villa. It was eight P.M., *Deathless Love* time. At least one television in Hickorn was not on, the set in this living room.

"Superintendent Kiet," Vance Popkirk said flatly, concealing the surprise in his voice, though not in his eyes.

"Thank you," Kiet said, nodding to Monique, who sat opposite the special assistant to the deputy assistant undersecretary for trade, Far East.

"Monique asked me to stop by to go over some of Dicky's papers," Popkirk said. "I'm getting a hunch that wasn't the real reason."

"We found Mr. Monroe's Cadillac," Kiet said.

Popkirk's suntan blanched. "A Fleetwood Brougham wouldn't be an easy target to miss."

"It was easy for us to miss," Kiet said, looking at Binh, whose attention was on Monique. "I am not making excuses for our sloppy police work, but our omission may be akin to the removal of anything conspicuously out of place. When it is absent, it is also out of mind because it did not belong to begin with. Thanks to Monique's wisdom, I turned our search to the negative space.

"Would you care to know where we found it?" Kiet asked Popkirk.

"Out of idle curiosity, sure."

"You are correct that it was not an easy target to miss. Once we had a clue where to search, that is. And it was at our first stop, Minister Vo's villa. The Cadillac was in his garage. A fender and a door are gone, possibly on the bottom of the Ma San River. To dispose piecemeal of a vehicle is tedious work.

"Would you care to know why Minister Vo's villa was our first stop, Mr. Popkirk? Out of idle curiosity?"

Popkirk nodded. "Out of idle curiosity."

"In your presence, in Mr. Vo's office, he remarked that Mr. Monroe had been injected with nicotine."

"Common knowledge. So what?"

"It was common knowledge that he had been injected with a poison. It was *not* common knowledge that the poison was nicotine. Evidently, at that time, only you and Vo, Captain Binh and I, and a druggist knew that it was nicotine.

"We made a faulty assumption that since the story of Monroe's deadly injection had spread throughout Hickorn the story was complete. I owe that druggist an apology."

Vance Popkirk studied his fingernails.

"Mr. Popkirk, did you assist Minister Vo in the murder?"

"I wasn't there," Popkirk said. "Chuong called me afterward and begged me to come."

"You assisted Vo in moving the body to Channel Seven?"

"Yeah. It was the middle of the night before the casket was opened on the air. We used Dicky's keys."

"What was Minister Vo's version of the killing?"

"An accident he capitalized on," Popkirk said. "They'd been arguing, and it turned physical. Chuong is my friend, but he's a greedy man. He kept escalating Dicky's kickback. Dicky said he wasn't going to pay any more. Chuong said, fine, I'll issue ten import licenses and collect from ten distributors, and the competition will put you out of business. Fine, Dicky said; I'll go public about the kickbacks, and you'll be out of a job."

"Chuong alleges that Dicky took a swing at him. Chuong landed a punch and knocked Dicky down. He hit his head on the corner of a table. Chuong rationalized what transpired later by saying he was dead anyway. From what I could see of the wound, I don't think he was. I think he was just out cold."

"He capitalized on it by nicotine injection?"

"Yeah. Vo's back yard looks like a botanical garden. He said he rummaged through his gardener's potting shed and found a bottle of the stuff and filled a syringe. He was rid of Dicky and maybe that nutty Custodian bunch, too, if he could pin Dicky's death on them."

"Two birds with one stone," Binh said, suddenly out of his trance.

"Minister Vo was greedy, Mr. Popkirk," Kiet said. "What was in it for you?"

"Career enhancement. I'm ambitious, Kiet, not greedy. Luong is a two-bit country. Dollars in and dollars out, the bottom line is insignificant, but it looks good on paper anywhere you are if you have a balance of payments surplus. We have so few of those. We have a small surplus in Luong, due primarily to cigarette imports. I helped Chuong because I wanted to keep things running smoothly. I'm up for a promotion, you know."

"Congratulations," Kiet said. "Unfortunately, you're too important to this case to leave Luong."

"Uh-uh," Popkirk said, smirking. "You're forgetting diplomatic immunity. I'm under the umbrella. I'll be on the next plane out. Family emergency at home or whatever."

Kiet knew that he could not detain the man without solid proof of guilt, and probably not even then. Laws protecting foreign officials from the consequences of their own behavior were bizarre. He tried a bluff. "As a material witness, no, I could not hold you. As a person charged with murder, we shall see."

Popkirk laughed.

"You have two little problems that equal one big problem," Kiet said. "Nicotine and the syringe. Nicotine. Why would Vo have nicotine? According to our druggist expert, nicotine is an ingredient in prepared pesticides. The syringe. Why would Vo have a syringe unless he were a diabetic or a drug addict? Is he either?"

"No," Popkirk said.

"The murder was premeditated. Nicotine and a syringe were components in a plan. We will eventually trace them. You didn't help Vo clean up a messy accident, Mr. Popkirk. You were an accessory to murder."

"No way."

"Or who is to say it wasn't vice versa. The three of you were at Vo's. You lost your temper. Vo helped clean up your mess."

"Dicky, Vo, and he were inseparable," Monique told Kiet. "I'll testify to that."

"You informed me that you inseparables had lunch two days prior to the murder, Mr. Popkirk. Perhaps dinner the night of the murder, too. We will interview Vo's servants."

"We definitely will," Binh said, writing in his notebook for effect.

"Okay, I was there. I was trying to mediate. This thing between them had been simmering for weeks. I went into Vo's kitchen for more ice. That's when the fight started. I ran out right when Dicky's head conked the table corner. The rest is true. I don't know where the hell Chuong got the nicotine and the needle, now that you mention it."

"Splendid. Will you testify—"

"Uh-uh. I'm talking to you as a public service. Read my lips. I'm on the next plane out."

"Captain, what is a 'two-bit' country?" Kiet asked.

"Well, worthless and crummy and shabby are words that come to mind."

"Yes," Kiet said. "We are so worthless, we are primitive and inefficient. An exit visa could take weeks to process. You would be smeared by the pretrial publicity, thus destroying a promising career."

Vance Popkirk's winning smile came into full bloom. He said, "Hey, I've got a terrific idea. Why don't I give you a deposition?"

“Bamsan,” Quin said, “Monique was invaluable to your investigation.”

“Mm.”

“I am unclear why she was so indirect. She teased your brain with puzzles. You asked her to draw Vance Popkirk into her home so you could interrogate him privately. He would not have voluntarily. Then she barely spoke ten words.”

“Um.”

“Bamsan.”

“Quin, can you please wait until a commercial? That fellow Monique picked up in the bar, my detective intuition tells me it wasn't a chance meeting.”

“Yes, Bamsan. We can wait.”

And they did. This was Monique's third *Deathless Love* episode since her tragic sabbatical. Her fifth husband, whose coffin Dicky Monroe had usurped, was declared legally dead in the interim. She promptly became engaged to a scion of a rice milling empire and was already preparing to cheat on him with this bar pickup, a handsome rogue who struck Kiet as an opium warlord in town in disguise for some criminal purpose unknown to the audience but, of course, not to Monique.

The commercial break had been bought by a Hickorn manufacturer of laundry soap. *Deathless Love* was at last a bona fide soap opera.

A peasant woman was shaving slices of the sponsor's bar into a galvanized tub with a pocket knife. The tub foamed like a cold mug of Golden Tiger. A jabbering voiceover swore that the product would dissolve in the most brackish river water. Kiet suspected chemical shenanigans.

Kiet said, “Monique's motivation was extremely simple once I analyzed it. She was suspicious but lacked direct evidence. Second, she is a professional villainess. She is Monique. Who would accept her story? The Custodian diversion prevented her from being the prime suspect.”

“You make sense.”

“I am a detective.”

“Bamsan, your success in this case has made you smug.”

“The weight of Popkirk's deposition and the physical evidence,

the car, caused Vo to confess. Are you confusing smugness with the glow of a job well done?"

"Popkirk slipped out of your fingers."

"I would have had to shoot him to detain him. My bluff fell apart, but not before he gave us a splendid deposition. He was in Bangkok twenty-four hours following our session."

"Too bad."

"Popkirk will receive what he deserves. He was promoted. He is a *chief* special assistant to the deputy assistant undersecretary for trade, Far East."

"He doesn't deserve a promotion."

"Yes, he does. He deserves this promotion to the north of Thailand, in Golden Triangle country. He won't be able to resist dealing with the opium warlords like he did the cigarette kings of Luong. He'll encounter tougher sorts than Vo and Monroe. I would not care to be his life insurance agent. Oh, the commercial is finished. Speaking of opium bandits, Monique and—"

"Bamsan."

"Quin. Next commercial."

"Bamsan, you are smug."

"Shhh. Ow!"

"Bamsan, you and your detective intuition, what of the Custodians?"

"What of them? Chuong Vo is our killer."

"Does it not bother your detective intuition not to have taken their leaders into custody?"

"Slightly."

"What would you say if I said they had no leaders, no meetings?"

"Nonsense."

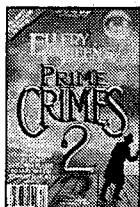
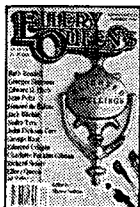
"What if I said the origin of the Custodian name is hazy and that Custodians are people with no formal association with one another. Custodians act alone, doing what their consciences dictate."

"Quin, look. In the shadows. Monique and her new boyfriend are being followed."

Quin unzipped her purse and removed a can of aerosol spray paint. "No. You look."

Bamsan Kiet looked.

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MEGH-1

# UNSOLVED

by  
Walter Shepherd

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the June issue.*

Abou Ben 'Ad 'Em (may his tribe decrease!) determined to rob the Great Mogul, Arfamo, who kept the bulk of his riches in the Hall of Seventy Rooms. Each of these rooms, excepting only those against the outside walls, had four doors, and out of the one hundred and twenty-three doors, fifty were always kept locked. Abou succeeded by a trick in drugging the guard, but his drugs, being of Foreign Manufacture, were not very good, and he had to find his way to the Treasure Chamber through the open doors, and make his return journey, in something under five minutes.

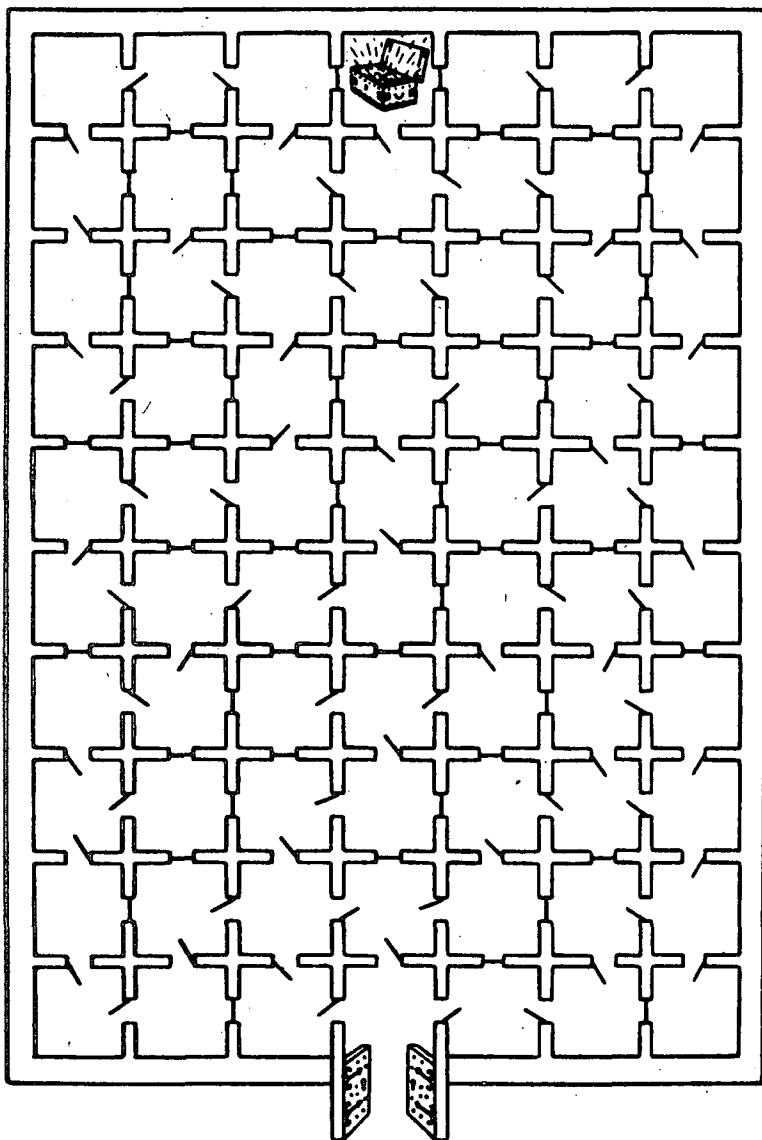
Which way did he go?

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See page 149 for the solution to the April puzzle.

*"The Hall of Seventy Rooms" from MAZES AND LABYRINTHS: A BOOK OF PUZZLES by Walter Shepherd (revised edition), copyright © 1961 by Dover Publications, Inc.*







# The Message

by Sybil Baker

**T**he mysterious message came in the middle of April, eight months after B. J. had been ditched by the love of her life. For eight months, B. J.'s spirits had wallowed in that ditch. She was twenty-three, and her world lay in two pieces. On the other side of that watershed event, the Big Split-up, lay the paradise of the past, the color movie,

in shimmering greens and golds. On this side stretched the bleak and endless present, black and white and gray as far as she could see. She would never love another man the way she had loved Don, she was sure of that.

And, in fact, it would have been hard to match Don Roberts' qualifications for a central place in a young woman's

heart. He was startlingly handsome, first of all, and a good listener: he was the only person B. J. had ever told about her alcoholic parents. Like her, Don had had a miserable childhood. Moreover, a wicked ex-wife lurked in his past, along with a vindictive ex-boss. Neurotic, divorced, lonely, jobless, gorgeous, burdened with a name that people insensitively transposed—if he'd had tuberculosis, or had been an Air Force lieutenant on his way overseas to a certain death, he would have been perfect. In any case, he met someone older than B. J., and with a great deal more money, and moved with her to Hartford. Don had written B. J. saying he would never forget her and that he would pay her the four hundred and fifty dollars he owed her next month. She hadn't answered. He never sent the four fifty.

B. J. was a medical records librarian at a small private hospital in Reddingford, Connecticut. The day, eight months later, that she got the mysterious message, the job had seemed especially dreary, and her aerobics class at the Y afterward seemed as flat as the tummy of its exacting instructor. Her friend Michelle, who was usually at aerobics, was instead having dinner with her

boyfriend's large and merry family. All in all that Monday night, B. J. felt like a starving orphan with her nose squashed against the bakery window of life.

B. J. lived on the ground floor in one of those big old houses divided into apartments. As she drove in, she saw that her parking spot had been taken by the stewardess upstairs. She sighed, backed out, parked on the street, and trudged up the walk to her front door. From behind the shrubbery, her living room glowed with light. Before leaving the house, she had thought ahead to nightfall and turned on several lamps for the benefit of her menagerie, two dogs and two cats that she had rescued at various times from various alleys. At the moment, they were all asleep.

Does the red light on an answering machine wink when there is nobody home to witness it? Or rather, when there's nobody awake? Yes, it does (in both cases), and it did that night, slowly and significantly, over and over, while a blind blond cocker spaniel with straw-colored eyelashes melted like taffy into one corner of the worn Oriental rug; a fluffy gray and white kitten slept on the mantel, with one hind leg dangling over; a lean old black cat dozed in an easy chair, and

back to back with it, and half its size, slept a hairless dog that B. J. had discovered in a garbage can. (When it would shiver at the memory of this trauma, B. J. would soothe it by explaining, "Teensie, they probably didn't mean to throw you away, they just overlooked you.")

There was a package on the doorstep. B. J. knew what it was: Mr. Ripley at the corner had asked her if she could use some bones. Mr. Ripley's place was a whirlwind of energy in any kind of breeze, with dozens of painted wooden lawn ornaments suddenly moving, whirling, clicking, and clacking—on the grass, perched on poles, hanging from the trees. Most of them were birds that were supposed to look as if they were flying but really appeared to be swimming, with a powerful crawl stroke. And in his own genial, relaxed way, Mickey Ripley also covered a lot of ground. He worked as a handyman on a nearby estate, turned out one or two more lawn ornaments a week, and in his spare time bestowed innumerable small kindnesses on all the neighbors.

During a blue mood, there is nothing like a bit of benevolence to make the cup run over. Eyes streaming with tears, B. J. clutched the bundle of

knobs and gristle to her heart, entered, and slumped sobbing into the nearest chair.

The animals, of course, had all waked up and thumped onto the floor when they heard the key turn in the lock. As they bounded over to welcome her, B. J. brokenly greeted each of them by name and distributed strokes and pats before finally wiping her eyes on the fluffy kitten, who never objected to being a handkerchief because he was too young to know better. Then she got up and walked to the small table against the wall, where she saw by the rhythm of the winking red light that there was just one message. She sniffled and pressed the button to listen.

Delivered in a warm, attractive male voice that conveyed heartfelt sincerity, the message was, "You don't understand. I love you."

B. J. was thunderstruck. There was no man in her life. During the eight months since she had broken up with Don, she hadn't dated anyone more than twice. She immediately replayed the message. There was something vaguely familiar about the voice. Or was there? It was a little husky, perhaps merely husky because of its unmistakable emotion.

Involuntarily she glanced at the tall windows above the win-

dow seat. The shrubbery ensured privacy, but she went to close the drapes with a quick, vigorous step, as if conscious of eyes from the street during an intimate moment, and returned to sit next to the answering machine. The blind dog, Belinda, snuffled under B. J.'s limp, unresponsive hands as she played the message four times in a row.

It must be a wrong number, she decided. Some guy right this minute was wondering why his girlfriend didn't call him back. No, it wouldn't be a girlfriend. The word "love" was emphasized in a way that suggested the caller was expressing his feelings for the first time.

But she had heard that voice! Where had she heard that voice? A moment later, she was convinced that Don had left the message. Yes, of course! That's why he hadn't identified himself, because he knew she would know his voice!

Such sudden flip-flops were not unusual for B. J., whose grasp of reality tended to be a little mushy at the center, like a muffin baked too fast. Her own image of herself and the world's image were totally at variance, for example. Take her nose, which was a good deal better than most noses and which bore an infinitesimal bump on its bridge if she looked

at herself full face and then turned slightly to the left. The world saw a perfectly chiseled nose; B. J. saw a Halloween witch. Something similar was lost in translation regarding her hair and eyes. Her long, wavy hair was between brown and gold, and her eyes between brown and gray—to B. J., "sort of blah" in both cases. On the other hand, she would have been surprised if she had overheard two of her coworkers agree that "B. J. would be really pretty if she only stood up straight." She was under the impression that she stood as straight as a soldier.

Because of her childhood—when her parents weren't drunk they were perfectionists—she'd got the idea that she was worth something less than a six-pack of domestic beer. And knowing that she lacked self-esteem, she'd begun to work on it. For some time, she had been repeating to herself at frequent intervals, "I am not a yo-yo but a valuable human being," or something of the sort. Nevertheless, at the thought that Don might be free now, her heart reversed into its yo-yo mode, spinning and jumping, just as it always had.

She opened her mouth, and strange joyful sounds emerged. Oh yes: laughter. Ah yes, happiness—she had almost forgot-

ten how it felt.

Nelson, the gray and white kitten, trotted past her with his blue rubber band in his mouth, heading for the kitchen. The rubber band was half an inch wide, from a bunch of broccoli, and Nelson loved it the way a toddler loves his blanket. When he trotted back—Nelson never walked when he could trot or run—the rubber band was dripping wet: he had stored it in the water bowl while he lapped, then picked it out again. That night B. J. taught him to retrieve. Over and over she threw the rubber band; over and over he scampered after it, and at least half the time fetched it back to her.

Finally she went to bed. On her back, she smiled into the dark. A few weeks ago it had thawed, but now it was cold again, definitely four-pet weather. Nelson, his rubber band next to him, lay on her chest with his head under her chin, purring his loud purr. Panther, the black cat, curled at her waist; Teensie and Belinda flanked her feet.

Just before she woke up the next morning, she dreamed that Don and she were climbing a tall ladder into some kind of wonderful pool in the sky. Or else, it was a slightly different Don because Don in real life had never liked the water. But

in the dream, she and Don, or whoever it was, kissed at the top of the ladder and slipped into this blue pool in the blue sky—she could see clouds at the edge of it—and kissed again in the water and slithered together, laughing and slowly turning in the luscious water.

She had gone to bed happy and excited; she woke up happy and tranquil. Maybe Don left the message. Maybe someone else did. She had observed all the stages of pain in the breakup, from missing Don, Don himself, to missing someone. And this morning an analogous progression took place. Maybe Don loved her. Or maybe someone else did. But someone did. There was no doubt that the tenderness in the mysterious caller's voice was genuine.

By the time she reached the office, she had come up with two additional suspects besides Don.

Sometimes voices sound different on the phone. The fact that she did not recognize the voice, she reasoned, simply meant that she had never had a telephone conversation with the caller. That narrowed it down. Well, there were two men she had dated whom she had never talked to on the phone: Russ in her aerobics

class at the Y, and Fred at the hospital—although she'd left Fred plenty of messages.

B. J. had a private office adjoining a huge room where the patients' medical charts were filed—soon they would all be put on microfilm. The first thing she did was to call Michelle and ask her to come over that night to listen to something, and the second was to reach for the small pile of incomplete charts, knowing that some of them were for Fred Simms's patients. It was the perfect excuse to phone him.

B. J. was not like the nurses, who would not stoop to going out with a doctor and who talked of the medical staff in ribald terms. Actually, she'd been a bit attracted to Dr. Frederick Simms, an internist, even before she'd fallen for Don. Fred had a sophisticated, airy manner and a flirty, dirty laugh; she had been quite pleased, a couple of months after Don had left, when Fred had stopped in at Medical Records and asked her out.

"I have a special treat for you tonight, B. J.," he'd said as he ushered her into his Porsche. "You can witness me being a complete idiot." He thus charmingly excused himself from any future accountability for the duration of the date.

Like many doctors, Fred had

an incurable case of golf. He took her to a driving range that was lit so brightly the grass looked plastic, and sent golf ball after golf ball soaring over the vivid green field. B. J. watched his swiveling hips and his engaging grin and the flying golf balls and wondered whether she should talk, and if so, when. Occasionally, the ball would go only a short way, or go into what she figured was the foul zone, and then Fred would speak to her with great excitement. "See? See? I didn't keep my head down. You gotta keep your head down!" And she would nod, thoroughly bored but determined not to show it. Therefore, she cooed and gurgled when the ball went extra far and despised herself for it. After a two hundred fifty foot drive, Fred suggested she spend the night at his place.

"No, thank you," she said politely. He didn't seem to take offense, and she pigeonholed him as a man who was just looking for sex. She quietly wrote him off—after hours, anyway.

One of B. J.'s responsibilities was to make a list of patients who had died each month. In preparation for the monthly staff meeting, B. J. listed terminal patients and their final diagnoses, which their attending physicians were sup-



posed to write on the covers of the charts.

The easy part was making sure that she didn't put "osis" for "isis" or vice versa, or have Melvin G. Fromm, seventy-seven, die of a puerperal, or after-childbirth, infection and Hilda Marie Ysidro pop off from carcinoma of the prostate. It wasn't even that hard to read the handwriting of most of the doctors, since she was used to their scribbles. But getting the doctors to complete their charts was another matter. Fred Simms was the worst of all. Sometimes B. J. wondered if he left the charts incomplete on purpose, to have an excuse to stop by. He was always asking her out; she always found an excuse not to go.

As she reached for the phone to call him, the young internist himself breezed in. With a wide smile, he ogled her for a moment and said, "Good morning!" as if he were congratulating her on a job well done. He continued, just as enthusiastically, "What a sight for sore eyes you are this morning, B. J." He riffled through the stack of incomplete charts. "Wait till I tell you how I left Johnny Schwartz in the dust. The man can putt, but he can't drive, he couldn't drive a Chevrolet, believe me."

Schwartz was one of the sur-

geons on staff.

For a change, B. J. was delighted to see him—and furthermore, to hear him. From the moment he'd stepped inside the door, she had listened so hard to every syllable dropping from his lips that her self-consciousness had evaporated. She gave a slow smile. "Hi, Fred. Take two eyedrops and call me in the morning."

"Huh?"

"I thought you said something about sore eyes."

Fred's astonished eyes narrowed again, with a new gleam in them. "Beezhay," he said, affecting a French accent, "don't toy wiz me." He tossed a chart on her desk, having scrawled three whole letters on its cover: URI, which stood for upper respiratory infection. Ten minutes later they had only gone two holes, while B. J. listened raptly, studying Fred's speech patterns and wondering how she could get him to talk to her over the phone.

For his part, Fred, not used to such avid interest in his golf game, waxed more eloquent than ever as he relived his agony approaching the third hole, where "Johnny Schwartz is at this point two inches from the cup, do you believe it, B. J.?"

B. J. had been eight years old when she had dutifully helped

serve the drinks the time her dad's boss, a man with huge ears, had come to dinner and she'd asked him if he would like more ice in his ears. Since then, this disquieting affliction of voicing her thoughts had returned periodically. She beamed, clasped her hands together, and heard herself say, "Oh, Fred, I wish I could hear about the third hole on the phone."

Fred stopped talking, and his eyes went from left to right a couple of times like an anchorman who has lost his place. "On the phone?" he said.

B. J. said quickly, "What I mean is, I have all these charts to file—could you call me later?"

Fred blinked and swallowed and recovered just as fast as B. J. had. Any golfer as talkative as Fred Simms is used to these sudden sand traps. "By the way," he said, "are you washing your hair tonight? Or do you have some other even more imaginative excuse why you can't accompany me to the driving range?"

"I'm meeting a friend, sorry."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's the Y, sorry."

"You went to the Y yesterday."

"I go Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays."

"Beezhay, Beezhay, Beezhay,

why are you avoiding me, you pretty child? You know how I feel about you."

B. J. gave him an innocent look. "That's the trouble. I *do* know how you feel about me. I mean, hey, if only I were smaller, rounder, paler, covered with dimples, had a red dot, and flew two hundred yards whenever you kept your head down, we'd be a match."

Fred's jaw dropped. Then he laughed, and she did too, before he turned utterly solemn. "I've never seen my handicap in terms of a disability before," he said. "Thank you. I mean it." Meekly, he sat at a corner of her desk and completed all his charts, looking at her from time to time.

B. J. was as surprised as he was. She hadn't even fallen apart after she'd made that dumb remark; usually she'd be finished for the day. It must be the message that made her so brave, she figured. It was like a little pilot light, glowing inside her.

That evening, Michelle listened to the message several times with her eyes fixed on the small black answering machine. "Huh," she said with authority. Michelle always said everything with authority. Blonde and slight with a boyish figure, she did crossword puz-

zles in pen, straightened pictures on her friends' walls, and could list the thirty-one children with whom she'd attended second grade. But Michelle also had many good qualities, and B. J. considered her one of her best friends.

"Maybe it's a wrong number," B. J. said.

Michelle took a sip of her beer. "I thought you said the voice was familiar."

"Vaguely familiar, I did. But now it would be familiar whether it was or not." She hesitated. "At first I thought it was Don. Well, no, I didn't at first, but later. But now I don't think so."

Mentioning Don's name to Michelle was like throwing a match into an open can of gasoline. "That's not Don, B. J., that's not Don's voice. No way!"

"I know," B. J. said humbly.

"Did he ever pay you back that four fifty, by the way?"

B. J. shook her head. "It might be Fred, at the hospital. I wish I could hear him on the phone."

"What is it going to take to make you see Don Roberts for what he is? You've got so much more on the ball than that loser, that user—"

"Michelle—"

"All right, all right, all right." Eyebrows raised, Michelle examined a scratch in

her nail polish. "So the doctor never calls you on the phone?"

"He doesn't make house calls." They both laughed. "No, because he talks to me at the hospital. I just keep leaving messages for him when I'm trying to get him to fill out his charts or something."

Michelle wanted to hear the message again. "Tch," she said afterward. "Why does he do that, just like my mother."

"What do you mean?"

"B. J., that's the first thing he says."

When B. J. played the message this time, she heard it clearly. She had thought it was just a little imperfection of some kind on the tape, that small scratchy sound, just before he spoke. She put the tip of her tongue inside her upper front teeth and quickly withdrew it, making a "tch" herself. "You're right. What country is your mother from?"

"New Jersey. She still does that, like when she loses something, she goes, 'Tch, where'd I put it?' Doesn't your mother do that?"

B. J. had never told Michelle that her mother was more apt to say "hic" than "tch." "No," she said. "I was thinking of books by European writers where characters say that."

"It's just old fashioned. They call it clicking your tongue."

"Tch, tch," said B. J. "It's irritation, right?"

"Irritation, blame, nervousness, or concentration. Or pity."

"Or a poppy seed stuck in your teeth."

Michelle nodded. "See, this guy, this guy had some little tiff with you, B. J., like 'tch,' like he's saying, 'Dammit, you don't understand, like you're taking something I said wrong, I love you.'"

"Mmm-hmm." B. J. watched Panther washing himself. "I like it when they stick that leg up like a hambone." She paused. "Well, I've been grumpy with a lot of people lately."

"So how was Russell last night?"

"Fine. Including him."

Russell was in their aerobics class, and B. J. had gone out with him twice after Don left. He was a biochemist, freckled and bearded, shy on occasion but fond of making people laugh. At a Y dance she'd attended with Don, Russell had asked her to join him in a tango. When she had declined, Russ had marched to a standing fan in the corner, unplugged it, and danced it back into the center of the gym, where his amorous dips and turns got a lot of applause.

The two dates hadn't gone

very well. Mentally she'd kept seeing Don's face where Russell's was, as if Russ were an actor, holding a mask over his face. It made conversation difficult. After the second date, he didn't ask her out again but always greeted her with a friendly word. B. J., however, who was getting tired of being rebuffed by men (even ones she wasn't attracted to), began to find that Russell always seemed to rub her the wrong way.

Not too long ago, for example, he had looked her up and down and remarked, "Hey, new outfit, huh? Wow, B. J., you're really getting in shape." Brooding over the incident later, B. J. realized he was probably just talking about fitness. Then she'd stuck her jaw out and scowled. If there was one thing she hated, it was being looked up and down. By someone who didn't like her, at least.

"Please!" she'd said at the time, in the tone of voice a man uses when he says, "Sweetheart," to a woman who has annoyed him. After that, Russell had avoided her. But sometimes B. J. had caught him looking at her quizzically, and recently, when he said hi to her, he seemed to be blushing.

Michelle suddenly shrieked.

"What's the matter?" B. J. was terrified.

Michelle spoke in a hoarse whisper. "Somebody turned out the light in your hall." She paused. "Or maybe a bulb burned out."

The sounds of a cantering kitten and various furry thumps sounded. "Oh, that's just Nelson," said B. J., relieved. Nelson often played in the side hall that ran almost the length of the apartment, starting at the front door and ending at the bathroom. One wall was furnished with a tall bookcase at one end and a bureau at the other; halfway between them on the other wall was a low bookcase. On both sides, extra dining room chairs were placed here and there. B. J. explained that Nelson liked to see if he could go the whole length of the hall without touching the floor. She walked into the hall with Michelle trailing her and switched the light on again.

"But why does he turn out the light?"

"He pretends the switch is a moth and leaps at it from the bookcase. It used to crack me up." Nelson was at the top shelf of the bookcase now with his front legs above his head and his claws hooked into the tops of the books. His neck was craned as he looked down at them with a wild glint in his eyes and his tail lashing. When

Panther strolled by, Nelson leaped, twisted in the air, and landed on Panther's head. The two rolled the length of the hall in a ball of thudding and hissing and disappeared into the bedroom.

"They'll make up in a minute," B. J. said. "You hungry?" She heated up a frozen pizza, and at the table in the dining area they continued to discuss the evidence while Panther and Nelson slept on the easy chair. They agreed that the caller was someone who assumed his voice would be recognized, so it must be someone B. J. knew at least casually, though she needn't necessarily have dated him. It was more likely to be someone she had never spoken to on the telephone, with whom she'd had some sort of misunderstanding, and who occasionally said, "Tch."

"I wonder if it's Fred," B. J. said.

"Make a point of talking to him on the phone. Pretend you're a patient if you have to. Get them all on the phone. That's the first thing."

"Hey, I'll make it a conference call," B. J. said. "I don't think I have Russ's number any more. Maybe I'll stand next to him tomorrow night at aerobics."

B. J. paused at the front steps

of the Y, watching Russell lope down the sidewalk. She had never seen him in a business suit before. As he approached the steps, she gave him a big hello, and he muttered an absent-minded "hi" and hurried past her.

Not exactly the behavior of someone with a crush on her, B. J. thought. Or maybe it was. If she had left a message like that, she reflected, she'd avoid the person the rest of her life.

She changed to her leotards and tights in the women's locker room. Michelle was always late on Wednesdays because of her Spanish class beforehand. When B. J. walked into the huge, echoing gym, people were warming up against the wall or chatting, gathered in small clumps on the glossy wood floor. Two older men shot casual baskets at one end. The class drew a mixed crowd, everyone from young hot dogs with hair that could cut pizza to doddering old things who waved their arms so vaguely during the jumping jacks that they looked like something under water.

Michelle joined her. "*Hola. No está aquí, Russell.*"

B. J. had taken only French, but she grasped her friend's meaning, saying *au contraire*, she had seen him earlier.

Michelle paused, as if search-

ing for the right word. But when she spoke, it was in English. "Listen, B. J., I wasn't going to tell you this." She looked very serious.

"What?"

"Karen Gardella went to this political party in Hartford last weekend. And guess what, Don's live-in, what's her name, Susan, was there with another guy. And she told Karen she had left Don."

"You're kidding," said B. J. in a voice devoid of emotion.

"I finally figured you better know."

Russ appeared, ambled over to the side of the gym, and began warming up, bending from the waist and grasping his ankles.

"Well, whaddya know," B. J. said. "I wonder how much he owes *her*." She muttered, "So long," took a deep breath, and headed toward Russ. She felt Michelle's eyes boring into her back. She had acted so tough, but now that she could hide her feelings from Michelle's disapproval, she felt elated. And mad. And excited. And wary. And cynical. And again, joyful. Russell was standing upright again. As she drew near, she pulled in her stomach.

"Hi, Russ," she said. She gazed at his T-shirt and shorts. "My, how you've changed."

A radiant smile had settled

on her lips.

Russell looked at her with a who, me? expression. Then he laughed. "Oh, the suit. I had an interview today."

"Something good?"

He shrugged. "Maybe."

B. J. gave him a thumbs up as the music started. Aerobics that night seemed easier than usual. The instructor, Nancy the Nazi, was the same grinning robot. "You veel raise der straight leg in front of you vile you are sitting on der floor viz a strrrraight back, undt you veel enchoy it if you know vot's goot for you." At least, that is how B. J. and Michelle translated her Boston accent. You don't understand, Nancy, B. J. thought benignly, somebody loves me. She let the rap music from Nancy's boom box wash over her. Sure once again that the mysterious caller was her former lover, B. J. could hardly contain her happiness. It throbbed in the music and hummed in the air, bounced off the gym walls and soared through the hoops.

During the jumping jacks, she decided that she wouldn't run right back to Don, though. If he wanted her again, if he loved her, as he said he did in the message, boy, he'd really have a lot of persuading to do. She imagined herself saying, "I don't know, Don, I'm really en-

joying seeing a few guys."

Half an hour later, as they were doing modified situps with their hands behind their heads, Russell turned his head during his upswing. "You coming to class tomorrow?"

B. J. hesitated on the downbeat. "Yes."

"Want a cup of coffee afterward?"

"Sure."

In the locker room, she couldn't wait to tell Michelle that she was going out with Russell again. That made it easier to ask a few casual questions about the breakup. Susan was apparently moving to New York.

"So where is Don, then?"

Michelle shrugged.

When B. J. got home, she wanted to play the message right away, but the red light was winking twice so she retrieved the newer messages first. One was from a woman selling real estate, and the other was from some guy with a high, whiny voice who said, "Hi, B. J., I'm gonna be in Reddingford next Wednesday, hey, and I was wondering if you'd like to have lunch." She was thinking who the heck is that when the voice ended, "Is Victor's still in business?" and her jaw dropped as she realized it was Don, referring to their



favorite restaurant. Then—and now that she realized it was Don, the voice was not quite so high and whiny—he left a phone number.

She whirled the tape back to where she thought the mysterious message should start and went too far and impatiently listened to Michelle and to Jeannie from work and then to the sincere, tender, slightly husky voice she knew by heart—“Tch, you don’t understand, I love you”—and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was not Don. The voices were completely different.

Nelson jumped into her lap. “I’m nuts,” she explained to him. Belinda put her snout under one of her hands, and B. J. petted her. “Absolutely nuts. That’s all.” Teensie and Panther looked at her questioningly. “There’s no doubt about it.” So it wasn’t Don’s voice, but he wanted to have lunch with her. “Sure, Don,” she said pleasantly, “join the crowd.”

She lifted Nelson to the floor and rose. “Everybody who agrees I’m nuts go to the kitchen,” she said, heading in that direction, and they all dashed into the kitchen for their evening meal.

After feeding the animals, she went to the phone but withdrew her hand as soon as she touched it. Let him wait a day

or two. And by Wednesday, by the time they met again, maybe she’d know who’d left the message. During the day, she could concentrate on Fred, and during the evening, Russ.

Seized by a sudden inspiration at her office the next morning, she took a note from her pad and wrote: “*Tu ne comprends pas, je t’aime.*” Then she gave an evil laugh. She could tell Fred she’d only had Spanish in school and ask him if he could please give her the English translation. He was probably making his rounds right at the moment. Instead of leaving her usual message to please fill out his charts, she just requested that he call her.

But that afternoon he dropped in unannounced, as always, saying he expected she wanted his autograph.

“Yes, please,” she said, handing him a chart. “Oh, and could you do me a favor? A friend of mine got this note. I think it’s French. Does that mean what I think it means?” As she gave him the slip of paper, she watched his face as intently as one of her cats would watch a lizard, waiting for it to make a move.

“You don’t know what that means?” He gave her a long, knowing look, almost as if he were hurt, before reverting to

his usual bantering tone. "Little girls who pick up French sailors end up hating the sea," he said, tossing the note back on her desk. "Tch, I'm surprised at you! Obviously, you are culturally deprived and in need of expert advice."

B. J. was staring at him with round eyes as the "tch" resounded like a peal of thunder in her mind. "What did you say?"

He spoke louder, and in a French accent. "I said you have the need of expert—"

"Before that!" she interrupted.

"I said it means little girls who pick up—"

"After that!"

He folded his arms across his stethoscope and stared at her. "And tonight," he said, his voice becoming passionate and husky, "Beezhay, tonight you pretend to go to the Y, when *'allons enfants de la patrie, le jour de gloire est arrivé.'*"

B. J., who had also learned France's national anthem in her own French courses, was still too absorbed in the "tch" to mind being addressed as a child of the country and told that the day of glory had arrived.

He looked at her closely. "You are looking very odd, B. J. Shall I listen to your chest, my dear one?"

B. J. waved off his stetho-

scope. "Get that thing away from me."

As soon as Fred left, B. J. closed the door to her tiny office and grasped at her hair as if she would tear it to shreds. How like Fred to practically admit guilt and then squirm away from it—obviously he had problems with commitment. Then she called Michelle with what she called the "good news, bad news." The mystery was solved, and Fred was the perpetrator. She gave a heavy sigh.

"B. J., my mother would kill for me to go with a doctor, what's the matter with you?"

"He's not a doctor, he's a golfer, medicine is just a hobby. He just wants one thing, you know that."

"That's why he left the message. To explain that that's not true, he cares for you."

"Phooey."

"He makes a living. So of course you wouldn't like him."

Another jab at Don. "He doesn't know a thing about me. He has never asked me one single thing about my life. With him it's me, me, me."

"And with you it's Don, Don, Don. You're still living in the past." But after a while, Michelle softened and pronounced the evidence inconclusive. A lot of people click their tongues, she said. "Since we discussed it last night, I'm hearing every-

body do it. It's like, remember when I had hepatitis? All of a sudden you find out everybody's had hepatitis—and it's a rare disease."

"You're right, you're right," B. J. said, wanting to believe it. "I bet Russ goes 'tch' tonight. Is this the night you're seeing him? He'll go 'tch, tch, tch' so much you'll think you're out with a sewing machine."

He didn't, though. After their aerobics class, Russell and she went to a coffee shop. Unlike Fred, Russell wanted to know all about her. She finally told him about Don, and he told her about a woman he had broken up with and still missed sometimes.

"But it was for the best, I think. It was more on my side anyway." To her surprise, he lit a cigarette.

"I didn't know you smoked."

"Oh, sorry, does it bug you? I'll put it out. I'm down to one or two a day. I should quit, it's stupid."

"That's okay," she lied. She hated cigarette smoke. "So is that why it was for the best, you mean?"

He inhaled. "Sure, I was just playing it safe. If you go for someone who doesn't return it, that's a great way to avoid the whole thing, right? Like going for a married woman, going for

someone unavailable."

B. J. said she'd have to think that one over. He told her about the great job he might get at another firm, where he'd be the head of a department, and she warmed to his optimism about it. A little later she told him, "It's interesting to be with someone who's so happy all the time."

He admitted he tended to be happy. "Depending on where I am," he said. "I mean, you haven't seen me much outside aerobics." He made a face. "And that would be a drawback, if I get that job. I'd have to put in some night hours there, and I dunno when the hell I'd get to aerobics."

She hated to think he might not be in class any more. "Maybe some other aerobics class. They have some at noon." "Yeah." He shook his head. "Yeah, but I've been going to that class for a year. I mean, you know. Nancy's good. She's tough, but that's good. And there are some great people in that class." He glanced at her and glanced away quickly, reddening. "You don't understand, I love that class!" he said, and his blush deepened to a bright red.

B. J., as this variation of that crucial phrase echoed in her mind, went for a matching shade. Well, finally. The truth

was finally out. She studied his mouth and wondered what it would be like to kiss him, and since he was thinking the same thing about her, they sat there blushing like a couple of hot tomatoes. Before parting, they agreed to go to a movie the next evening.

On the way home, she reviewed the evidence, while her car seemed to turn at the correct intersections and nose into the appropriate lanes. No kiss, it turned out, had sealed the evening. And although Russell's inflection, when he'd said that about the class, was exactly the same as the caller's, his voice itself was lighter, not quite as husky. And he hadn't emitted one "tch."

And yet, and yet, she reasoned, he might have had a cold or something last week, when he left the message. And yet: if you had never heard a person speaking passionately, it might sound not only different but deeper than usual, if he did.

At work the next day, however, she began unearthing numerous objections to Russell as a potential love object. She sat at her desk, going over the patients' charts, and found no trouble diagnosing Russell's case. He was merely pleasant looking, and she was used to gorgeous men. And he smoked, ugh. And all that clowning

around—the time at the Y dance when he had tangoed with the fan. She was not a fan of people who danced with fans. But suddenly she put both elbows on the desk and both hands over her mouth. She realized she was just looking for reasons to find fault with him.

She stared at the phone and bit her lip. The ache to hear Don's voice again was like strong cramps. His real voice, speaking to her, not to a machine. Dialing the number, however, she almost hoped he wouldn't be in. Her heart was pounding faster than the phone's measured rings.

"Hey, how you doing, B. J.? It's so good to hear from you, babe! Thanks for calling back, hey! So, you free Wednesday for lunch?"

She said that would be fun, but how about Roberto's instead of Victor's? And while she was deciding whether to tell him she knew about the breakup, he said, "Sue and I are calling it quits, by the way. In fact, I'll probably be moving back to Reddingford."

"That's too bad. I mean, about Sue and you," B. J. replied.

After hanging up, she sat motionless for a moment. In one sense, it *was* too bad that he might be moving back—the news filled her with alarm. It

also inspired in her a hope that she tried to beat down as it unfolded, petal by petal, inside her. Teetering between "Thank God!" and "Oh Lord!," she alternately blessed and cursed the fates that had presented her with this quandary—with such perfect timing—just as she began to draw closer to a man (Russell) who (shudder) might be good for her.

The weather had been warming up the last few days. On Friday the sun had risen into a perfect sky, and Nature, proceeding with its own blessedly mindless unfolding, started to show its stuff. White dogwood and yellow forsythia sprinkled the landscape, daffodils trumpeted from the flowerbeds. And as the collective sap rose in the human race, it responded to spring in the traditional way by becoming unsprung. Friday evening the air vibrated with the twang of romance.

All around them, as B. J. and Russell waited for a table at the American Brothers' Greek Restaurant, they saw hands stealing into hands, bodies entwining. Yet they themselves did not get with the program.

B. J. was now operating under such a thick layer of secrets that it seemed to act like a sheet of Saran Wrap at the top of her mind. A thought would bubble up and remain trapped,

unable to emerge in speech. And Russell, who had begun the evening in high spirits, seemed to catch her mood.

By the time they ate, it was too late for the movie they'd planned on. Russell borrowed a newspaper from a nearby diner, and they argued politely over what they'd enjoy seeing. They compromised on a comedy that reviewers had termed "smashing," "two thumbs up," and "this year's best."

"I like these big movie houses, don't you?" Russell said glumly as they entered a cavernous and shabby theater.

"Yes," she said in a doubtful tone of voice, "compared with those little dark boxes." Three other people sat about an acre away. The rest of the world had apparently read the reviews in full: "In sum, it is a smashing bore"; "Its optimistic producers should be hung by their two thumbs up"; and "This year's best example of moronic filmmaking."

They left in the middle and found nothing to talk about on the way back to B. J.'s. On her doorstep, both apologized for acting weird. There was no mention of another date.

Saturday morning, as the birds chirped outside and bopped around on the buds, B. J. looked at herself in the

mirror and said, "You jerk." But she had read a book that said you should look at yourself in the mirror and say, "I love you, just the way you are." So she did that. "I love you, just the way you are," she said, "if only your nose was straight, and you weren't such a loser." She glared at herself in contempt. "Actually, if there's one thing I can't stand, it's dirty hair," she told her reflection, and realized she sounded just like her mother. She should call her mother. Might as well. She felt lousy anyway, so it wouldn't spoil her day. But instead, she just sat down on the sofa and sobbed and pounded the pillow next to her, raging at herself, her mother, her father, Don, Fred, and Russell, while the cats stared with interest and the dogs whimpered and skulked away, wondering what they had done wrong.

Finally she calmed down and stared into space. The cats went to sleep, and the dogs came back. Belinda crept over and leaned against her and licked her hands, sightless eyes raised mournfully. And as she petted the cocker spaniel, B. J. decided that if life couldn't give her what she needed, she would give it to herself. She didn't have a tape recorder, so she'd make do with what she had, she figured. "Walk, Belinda? Walk,

Teensie?" Belinda jumped around, wagging her tail, and Teensie, as she usually did at the mention of a walk, skittered under the sofa. "That's okay, Teensie," B. J. said. "You can stay here and guard the house."

With Belinda on a leash and occasionally bumping into hedges and fire hydrants, which never seemed to dent her happiness, B. J. walked the six blocks to the nearest gas station, put a quarter in the public phone, and dialed her own number. And when her voice came on, gaily relating how sorry she was not to be in, she waited for the beep and said, "Listen, B. J., you may not understand this, but I love you, just the way you are."

When they reentered the house, the red light was winking on the machine with just one message, and B. J. played it over and over and over and over and over.

She didn't feel on top of the world the next day, but she felt relatively solid. She dressed in bluejeans—jeans always made her feel ready for anything—made a big pot of coffee, tied on an apron, and made apple pancakes from scratch.

She had just settled down with the paper when the doorbell rang. It was Mr. Ripley

from down the block, with a pot of daffodils. Stuck in the earth next to the long narrow green leaves was a stick topped by a miniature bird, catching the breeze and doing the crawl to beat the band.

"Can you use a touch of spring?" he asked. Mr. Ripley rarely smiled, but his deep blue eyes did, forming pleasant little crinkles in his weatherbeaten face. He was middle-aged, but with a full head of brown wavy hair. B. J. had often thought he must have been goodlooking when he was younger. And yet he had the diffidence of someone who has never thought much about his looks one way or another.

"How beautiful! Oh, thank you!"

A sweet smile lit up his face as briefly and as brilliantly as a film-premiere beacon moving across a skyscraper.

B. J. buried her nose in the blossoms; daffodils smelled so much stronger and stranger than you thought they would. He was still standing there. "Would you like a cup of coffee, Mr. Ripley? I think I still have some left."

The smile lingered in his eyes; his face bore the mischievous look of someone about to tell a joke. "Only if you call me Mickey."

"Oh, right, you've told me

that before. C'mon in."

He stepped inside and followed her to the kitchen. "My wife used to wear an apron."

"What does she wear now?"

"You didn't know? She's long gone."

Startled, B. J. searched her memory. She'd never kept up much with neighborhood events. Was Mrs. Ripley dead, then? She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize."

"She left four months ago."

"Oh. No, I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"Well, nobody knew we'd been having any problems," he said. "Including me." Then he gave an uncomfortable laugh. "I come home one day and she was gone." He laughed again as B. J. handed him a cup of coffee. "Guess I talked when I should've listened."

B. J. didn't know what to say. "That's too bad. Wow. For a moment, I thought you were telling me she'd died or something."

"I wish."

His expression was so honest that B. J. laughed. "I know what you mean! Do you take cream and sugar, Mickey?"

"No, ma'am, thank you."

They sat at the dining room table looking at the daffodils, which B. J. had placed in the center.

"So how old do you think I



am?" Mickey asked unexpectedly.

B. J. gave an elaborate shrug. "Fifty?"

He gave a short, bitter laugh. "Thank you very much. I'm forty-two."

"Oh." Well, dammit, why did older people play that game? But Mickey regained his good humor instantly, and for a while, they talked about the animals. Panther remained curled in the easy chair, sleeping and smiling his enigmatic smile, but Belinda and Teensie made friends with him right away, and Nelson jumped into his lap. Mickey petted all three, scrupulously dividing his attention equally and chuckling occasionally. It was odd that he laughed so much when he smiled so infrequently, she thought. He had barely touched his coffee.

He reached out toward the daffodils, and with his forefinger extended like God's in the Michelangelo painting, he set the bird's wings to twirling. "I figured you could use a little cheering up," he said. "Mind if I have a cigarette?"

"No, not at all," B. J. lied. "I'll get you an ashtray." Looking around in the kitchen, again she was vexed. He had noticed her gloominess when she thought she'd hidden it so well. For a moment she stood

stock still. Had he watched her through the front windows or something? She promptly decided it was too nice a day for paranoia and fetched a saucer out of the cupboard.

"Don't you have an ashtray?" She shook her head. "Okay." He said it as if he were saying, "You'll be sorry."

He fingered the pack of Marlboros. "I figured you knew about the wife," he said, "you being on your own yourself." How did he know she was on her own? He withdrew a cigarette and tapped its filter end on the table, as he must have done years ago, before filtered cigarettes. "No fun, is it? See, that's why I always try to help you out a little bit." He glanced at her and back at his cigarette, appearing to examine its lettering. "As a matter of fact, I can help you out any way you'd like. I'd do anything for you. As you know."

He reached in his shirt pocket and withdrew a disposable lighter. It was lemon yellow, with a little red tab at the top, and when he pressed the tab, there was a "tch," and the flame shot up instantly.

As she was apt to do in moments of crisis, B. J. appeared as if made of stone. Disappointment and despair raged within her, like tumultuous winds through a hollow statue, while

her mind dwindled into something dull and far away, recording the precise information, to be dealt with when she could be alone. So it was just a lighter on the message. The caller was just poor Mickey Ripley. She gave a huge sigh then, and ached for both of them.

The most tactful thing to do would be to pretend ignorance. "Well, thank you, you're a wonderful neighbor, Mickey, we all, everyone, I don't know what we'd all do without you." To get away, she excused herself to fetch the coffee pot and, reaching for it in the kitchen, remembered in a grateful rush that Russell smoked, too. Just because he didn't use a lighter that night didn't mean he didn't own one. But the next moment she thought, so what? What a ridiculous week—as if her whole life depended on who loved her. That wasn't the problem; the problem was in her own misplaced loving, the unavailable men she was drawn to, so that she made sure it would never work out. Hadn't Russell himself said something like that?

When she returned, Mickey was inhaling deeply. He put the cigarette in the saucer and looked her full in the face. "I tell you I love you and you—don't you believe me?" His

voice was tender, husky, and passionate. "You don't believe I love you, like I told you on the phone?"

And when he said that, she felt no surprise because in B. J.'s life, it was only good news that had the power to astonish her.

"It's not love," she said at last. "You don't know me, Mickey."

"Well, you don't need to take it as an insult."

"I don't. I don't take it as an automatic compliment, though. You don't know me."

They gazed at each other sullenly. "Mickey, have you ever, haven't you ever been with somebody you just met and they say they know you like a book?"

"No."

"Well." She sighed. "Anyway, I believe you feel it, this love you feel, but I know it has nothing to do with me, Mickey, because you don't know me, don't you see what I mean?"

"I know you better than you think."

Again, with a prickle of fear, she wondered if he had been watching her through the shrubbery. Surely the dogs would have barked? But not if he'd already made friends with them. "Well, Mickey," she said, her voice revealing only kindness, "I hope you'll meet some-

one who's—someone who'll appreciate your warm heart."

"Oh, cut the crap! You sound like a soap opera."

"Oh," B. J. cried.

"You're just trying to get rid of me."

"I'm *not* trying to get rid of you." But she was, of course, and was beginning to feel panicky. "But a friend is coming over pretty soon, and it's a guy I kind of like, Mickey, and I've gotta clean the house." She was a convincing liar. In her desperation she almost believed it herself.

Mickey glared at her. "Is that so? So you met somebody finally, huh? You want to rub it in a while? Go ahead."

B. J. shook her head. She raised her hands at each side and dropped them again and Mickey grabbed one of her arms above the wrist.

"Let go of me." Her tone was quiet and firm. "I've got to get busy around here," she said, as if once she convinced him it was essential to make her linoleum oh-so-shiny-bright he would understand and free her wrist. "C'mon, Mickey."

He stared up at her, his grip tightening and his eyes mournful and scared, as if he were the one being bullied. "One kiss," he whispered.

"What?"

"Please?"

She wrenched away, crying out in pain, and ran from the room and down the hall. He quickly followed, while Belinda and Teensie ran after him, barking joyously at the game. B. J. made it into the bathroom and shot the bolt. She could hear him breathing on the other side of the door.

"That's pretty dumb," he said.

She remained silent, agreeing, picturing herself writing with lipstick on the toilet paper, dropping it out the window. But what was she thinking of? All she had to do was climb on the tub rim and open that little window and scream bloody murder. She wondered who, among the other tenants, was home today—the stewardess was gone again. But some neighbors would be home. She shook her head. She couldn't make a scene like that. No? Fine. Poignant epitaph for a gravestone: She Disliked Making Scenes.

In the hall, Mickey suddenly hit the bathroom door, probably with the ball of his fist. She remained silent, her heart pounding. "You don't understand," he pleaded.

"I want you to get out of here, Mickey."

There was silence.

She grabbed some spray cleaner, opened the door with a

terrible cry, and sprayed him as he beat a retreat, facing her with hands in front of his face, stumbling over Belinda, or else Belinda stumbled over him. In any case, they both yelped.

Mickey hit the floor on his back and rose so suddenly to his feet again that it almost seemed as if he'd bounced. He lurched toward B. J., who grabbed the lamp off the bureau and threw it, then a hairbrush, a book, a round tin box that caught him above an eye and came open in a disconcerting shower of buttons. "I'll teach you to watch me through the window! There are laws against that, you creep!"

"I never did!" he said at one point. And then, "So what if I did!"

By now, Belinda knew this was no playful tussle and had started to growl. B. J. yelled, "Sic 'im! Sic 'im!", which were words she remembered from her childhood but had never used in front of Belinda or Teensie. Teensie edged along the wall, shivering, and skittered into the bedroom and under the bed. But Belinda must have dimly remembered the command from her life with another owner, and barked and snapped at Mickey's legs when she could find them and gnashed the air ferociously when she couldn't. Panther,

who liked his peace and quiet, had stalked out the cat door with a disgusted look on his face. Nelson crouched on the top of the bookcase with his head low and his shoulders hunched up in sharp little wings. He watched the action as if he were watching a badminton game.

B. J. threw the jewelry box, which bounced off Mickey's shoulder and sprayed earrings all around, including on top of Belinda, scaring her off. There was nothing left on the bureau to throw except Nelson's blue rubber band, so she threw that. It landed on top of Mickey's head and nestled in his hair. And Nelson sprang.

Mickey yelled, and Nelson yowled as Mickey grabbed him. The kitten arched its back and dug in.

"I'll kill you if you hurt my cat!" B. J. warned.

"Did I hurt your dog?" Mickey muttered.

Later, B. J. remarked to herself that despite all the shinning, Mickey had merely kept shoving Belinda's muzzle aside instead of kicking her or hitting her, but right now she was too hypnotized by what she was witnessing to think of anything else. Mickey, in trying to extract Nelson from his hair, lifted him straight up. And as Nelson rose, so did the hair.

When Mickey glanced up and saw what he was holding, he dropped them both and clutched his poor bald head, while Nelson and the wig bounded over to the end of the hall and began wrestling. The wig appeared to be winning. At least it was on top, while Nelson clawed at it with his hind legs.

"Hey," said Mickey, "that there's a costly piece of merchandise." And then he laughed. He watched the kitten and the wig and laughed so hard he leaned his forearm against the wall and buried his head in it, pawing the carpet with one foot. He laughed so hard he pivoted around against the wall and with his back against it, doubled over, again and again, and then slid down the wall.

B. J., who didn't laugh until she told Michelle about it the next day, disentangled Nelson from the wig and held it out to him. "Here's your hair, what's your hurry?" she said without a trace of humor.

Mickey rose to his feet. Accepting the hairpiece sheepishly, he looked at her and grinned. "Guess I know when I'm licked," he said. "I'm a real bozo, I mean it," he said. "I'm lucky you didn't call the cops on me."

"Damn right," she said.

"Well, why'd you ask me in if

you didn't want something?"

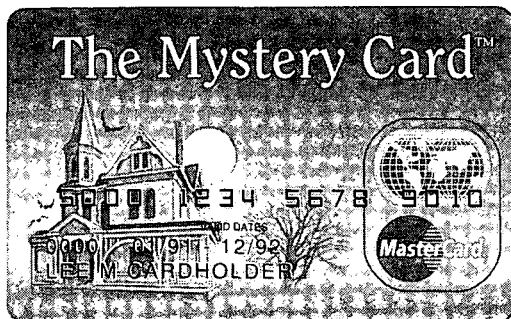
"I don't believe this!" B. J. yelled, not caring if the world heard her. Then her voice became low and menacing. "Get out of here."

Mickey backed out of the hall, into the dining area, picking up speed and muttering, "Take it easy," and B. J. followed him, pausing at the table to grab the flowerpot. He had just opened the front door when she threw it, and it sailed past him and crashed onto the front walk. B. J. took it as a very good sign that in trying to protect herself she hadn't broken her own windows. Mickey packed up all his wooden lawn decorations and moved to Long Island several days later.

After that week, with all its messages, B. J. lived a lot more happily ever after. She really worked on herself, as hard as she had worked on any course in school, and began to treat herself with more respect. The day after she'd thrown Mickey out, she called Don and canceled her lunch date. As time went by, she remained suspicious of Fred, and Russell remained suspicious of her. She finally began therapy. At the moment she is going with a man who treats her like a queen. And she adores him. Not only that, she likes him.

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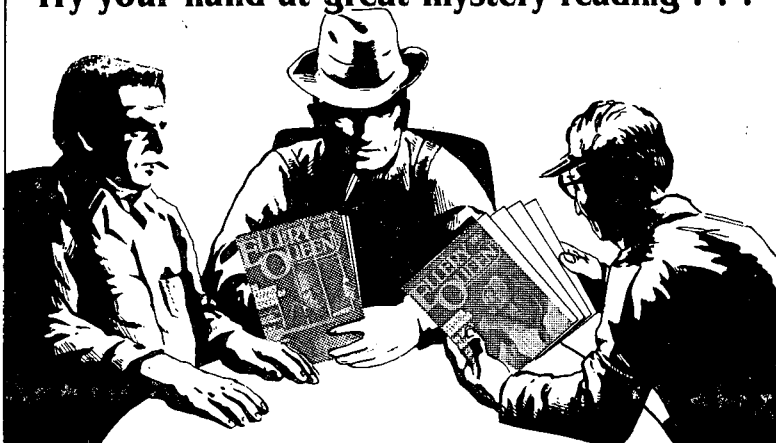


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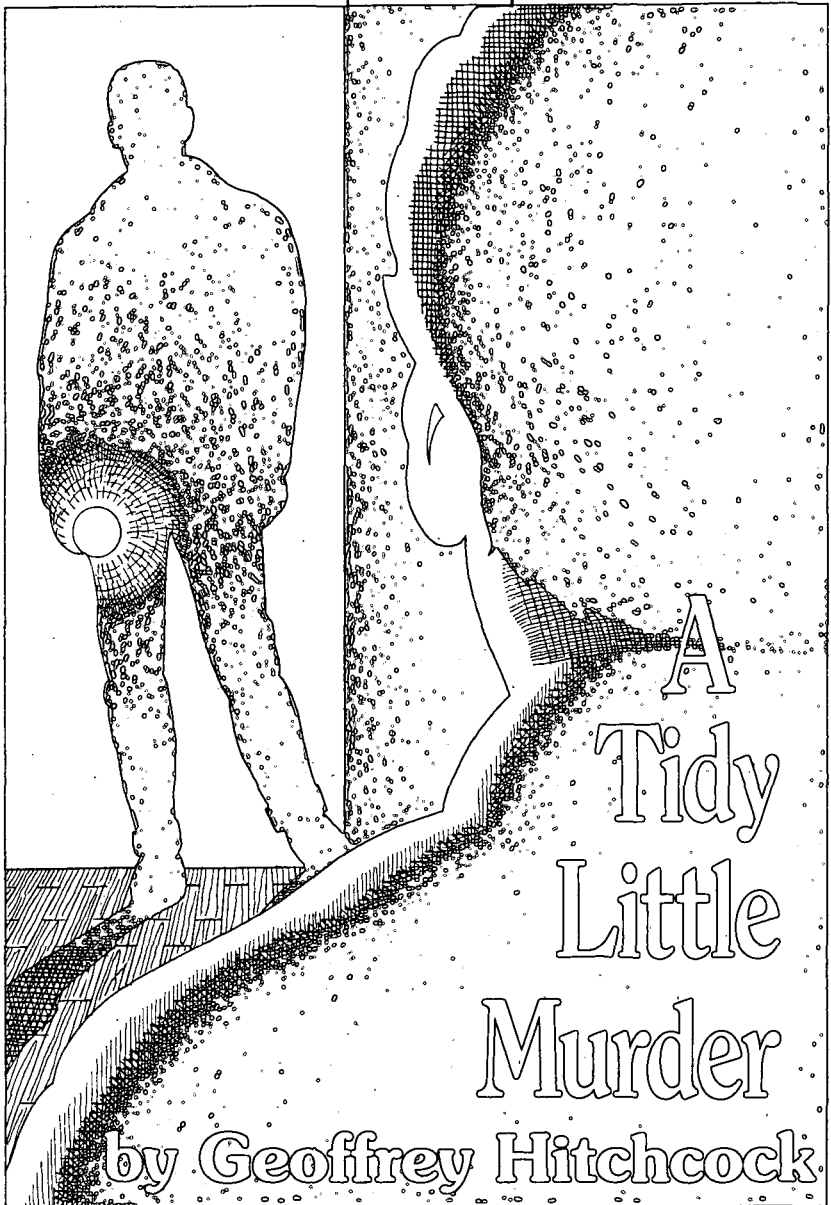


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**I**t happened a long time ago, but I've never had time to sit quietly and write it all down. I remember that we'd had a good crop—not a bumper one with bumper prices to match, that was 1950, nor a disastrous one with spring hail ruining the fruit, that was '51, so it was probably '52 or '53. The picking and packing were over but there was still a little activity in the dry yard, so it was probably in the last half of April, the start of the (so-called) quiet time. And it was a Saturday. I had been into Ceres with my truck loaded to the gunnels with farm laborers and their wives seeking their weekly supplies and had arrived home about noon to find George sitting on the front stoep with a glass of wine in his hand.

"This is the life," he said, "nothing to do but sit on the stoep and drink *vaaljapie*. You farmers have got it made."

"I thought it was coffee we are supposed to drink."

There was always a lot of banter when George came to visit about the soft life we farmers lived while lawyers slaved away in the city. George was a lawyer in Cape Town. We had been good friends from our university days, but whereas he had known exactly what he wanted to do, I had drifted from

one thing to another until I'd finally settled down as an orchardist in the Ceres valley. After the war it had been possible to buy some good farms cheaply, especially pear farms that had succumbed to the ravages of the codlin moth. But DDT soon wiped the moth out, and the farms became valuable again. Not that that will be of interest to anybody. George and I kept in touch, and he often drove his big Buick over the passes to spend a weekend with us.

"Where's Mary?" he asked.

"She's in Joh'burg for a couple of weeks, to her mother's."

"You should have told me."

"You wouldn't have come."

"I certainly wouldn't—don't tell me you're doing the cooking."

"Well, no. Letty is fixing lunch for us, and I'm looking forward to one or two of your gourmet omelets for dinner."

"There's hospitality for you!"

Actually George liked nothing better than a chance to display his culinary skills. Which were considerable. You'll make some lucky girl a wonderful wife, I used to tease him.

But I'm digressing again, sorry. It's just that it's interesting (to me) to find when I sit down to write what a flood of detail comes pouring into my mind. I can remember so

much—just about every tree in the orchard and the bluegums where the pack store stood and the willows by the pumphouse and the other big gums where the laborers' cottages sheltered and . . . dammit, what do you care? And of course, people. George, at that time, was in his early thirties, a big goodlooking man, dark and inclined to five o'clock shadow. A good build for a farmer or, I suppose, for intimidating the opposition in court. I was a bit on the skimpy side myself, though wiry enough. Still am, come to think of it.

I don't remember very much about the afternoon except that we finally wandered over to the dry yard where Hendrik Okhuis and Piet Maart were stacking the dried fruit trays for the night. We did a bit of stacking ourselves, help work up an appetite for those omelettes, I said. Then we went on through the Du Toit orchard to where Gideon was building a dam. He was working by himself with a Ferguson tractor and a small scoop.

"He'll never build a dam with that rig," said George.

"You'd be surprised—lots of quick little loads instead of big slow ones. They've built all that with two of those and two mule teams, and you can see it's all of eighteen feet high."

We walked on to the wall and Gideon stopped the tractor to say hullo.

"I'm glad to see you're working again," I said. He shrugged his shoulders. "It's got to be done, I suppose, and I've lost a lot of time."

"Don't worry, it's going to work out all right for you."

"I do hope you're right, Bill," he said.

We moved on and let him get on with his job. "That young man has troubles," said the ever-observant George. And he was right. Gideon had come home from the usual Saturday morning Ceres do three weeks ago to find his father crushed to death under a tractor. He was devastated and blamed himself for the accident, said he shouldn't have told his father not to go on the wall. If he'd kept his big mouth shut, the old man would have been content to plough some earth loose ready for him to scoop in the afternoon. Nonsense, of course, but you couldn't tell Gid that. He and his father were very close, especially after Gid's mother died, and even if they didn't always agree about how the farm should be run, they got on splendidly. Gid was for spending money and expanding while times were good, but the old man was cautious.

"One day this farm will be

yours," he used to say, "and then you can do what you like, but until then we are keeping out of the bankruptcy court."

"Well," said George, "I can appreciate his being upset over his dad's death, but actually he's fallen on his feet—imagine having a mortgage-free farm at his age. It's a good farm, isn't it?"

"Very good, and with plenty of room for development, but his father didn't leave it to him."

"You mean he didn't make a will?"

"Worse, he did make one—years ago before Gideon was born—leaving everything to his wife to be passed on to his son, that is, Gideon's elder brother. My guess is that he meant to change it but kept putting it off and finally forgot about it."

George grimaced. "Not very likely, sounds more like a case of a missing will. The old man should have destroyed the first one. Who is his lawyer?"

"I don't imagine he had one. With all due respect, George, some people regard the legal profession as sharks out to get their money. If I don't commit a crime, why would I need a lawyer, they say."

"A shark would have spared your friend a lot of trouble, and he's going to need one now

when he contests the will. A will like that doesn't stand a snowball's."

"Of course it doesn't, but Gid is trying to avoid contesting it. He's not sure but it's what his father wished. It's not uncommon for old families to leave everything to the eldest son. He wouldn't mind if his brother kept the farm and let him run it, but he won't. He insists on selling it. No wonder poor Gid is so low."

"No wonder. I suppose there's no chance of his buying the farm himself?"

"No, he hasn't any money of his own. There is a pretty healthy bank balance but it was his father's, so the brother gets that, too. Gid was never paid. He didn't lack for anything he wanted, but there was no salary or share of profits. He always assumed that he would inherit at least half the estate when his father died."

"I'm afraid your friend must be a bit simple. I'd better have a chat and sort out his legal rights for him."

We tossed the problem of Gideon du Toit about until it was time for George to display his culinary skills, which turned out to be so considerable that after dinner I would have been more than content for the evening to be spent in idle chat or listening to some music. In-

stead, George insisted we drive the six miles to Ceres to buy the *Argus*. I never bothered with the evening paper—the Cape *Times* arrived in our village at eight A.M. and I picked it up during the morning, but the *Argus* didn't get to the town until about eight P.M. I didn't think it worth driving six miles just to read a repeat of the morning's news or news that would be updated tomorrow morning. George had to be up to the minute with the goings on of the city, though, and that's how we came to have the evening paper from which George dug out an item that had us wondering. The body of a man found by a cleaner in a city flat that morning had been identified as one F. C. du Toit, a freelance journalist. There were no signs of a struggle, and the police assumed it was suicide.

"Coincidence?" asked George.

"There are thousands of Du Toits. But . . ."

"But what?"

"I'll tell you what I know about the brother. Mrs. du Toit was an English girl whom Danie du Toit met when she nursed him during World War I. The two sons were given family names—one from his and one from hers. Gideon's full name is Alfred Gideon, but Alfred didn't stick. Firstborn is

Francois Clive. F. C. And I'll tell you something more—I've never met F. C., I haven't been around here that long. He had no use for the farm. His parents let him attend university, he got his B.A. and elected to become a journalist. Old Danie used to say the biggest mistake he'd ever made was to send Francois to varsity, but at the same time, when he spoke of 'my son who writes,' there was a note of pride in his voice. The boy rarely came to the farm—token visits now and again just to make sure he wasn't cut out of the will, I suspect, or when he was short of money. Are you listening, George?"

A faraway look had come into George's eyes. "Do you, Francois Clive du Toit, take Jean Margaret Sutherland to be your lawful wedded wife?" "I do," he said.

"What on earth are you on about. You haven't heard a word I've said."

He came back to earth. "Yes, I have, every word. Now I'll tell you a long story—if you aren't too sleepy."

"Can't it wait till morning?"

"Sure."

But of course it couldn't.

George had grown up next door to a girl called Jean Sutherland. She was a cou-

ple of years younger than he was, but they had been good pals in a brotherly-sisterly fashion. He helped her with her homework, and they sort of assumed they would be married one day. Then, when he was seventeen and starting university, the Sutherlands moved to Port Elizabeth. They corresponded at first but he was busy at law school with no time to worry about girls and she was doing a secretarial course, so their letters became less frequent and then the war came and they were both away and lost touch. Until one day, outside the law courts, he spotted her with a dapper Air Force officer. She came running up to him, "George, dear George, always on hand when I need him. I'm going to be married—come and meet Clive, and please, please come and be a witness because we are on our own. Mum and Dad couldn't be here, and Clive is an orphan." So he had gone with them and heard the name Francois Clive du Toit. Which he'd never forgotten. He'd gone back to his office and kicked himself for losing touch. She had grown into a lovely young woman.

"And you put her from your mind but never married."

"That's more or less true."

"Didn't you ever see her again?"

"Not until a week ago. My firm has a client named Winston Sanderson. He's a city councillor, an ambitious fellow who hopes to be the next mayor, but besides that he runs one of those money making companies with fingers in everybody else's pie. So we do quite a lot of work for him—finding loopholes, tax dodging, company takeovers, that sort of thing. Old Carter usually attends to it but he's overseas, so I was deputed to visit the great man. Who should I find working as his private secretary but . . ."

"Jean du Toit, lawful wedded wife of Francois Clive."

"That's right. Sanderson kept me waiting for ten minutes or more, so we had quite a long chat. She doesn't live with Clive, the marriage wasn't a success. He was kind to her and generous, but he was a mystery. He always seemed to have money, yet he did very little work. He had no friends. She thought a journalist's flat would be full of books and papers and mess and interest, but it was bare, tidy, sterile. He wouldn't confide in her, he discouraged her from having friends. After six months she told him she was moving out. He didn't try to stop her."

"Why didn't she divorce him?"



"She said she hadn't bothered, there wasn't anyone else. He could have sued her for desertion, but it must have suited him to have a wife in the back-ground."

"Funny sort of cove—I wonder why she married him?"

"He could no doubt turn on the charm when it suited him. Anyway, you're not supposed to speak ill of the dead."

"I was forgetting. At least Jean has spared herself the expense of a divorce."

George gave me a startled look. "I'm sorry," I said, "I phrased that badly. I meant she has been spared the cost."

"Of course you did, the other is unthinkable, but you've made me realize she may be under suspicion from the police. If you don't mind, we'll skip the climb tomorrow."

"Of course, Sir Galahad, a damsel in distress takes precedence. The Skurweberg can wait. In any case, it's going to rain tomorrow."

"That will keep your friend off that dam wall. Funny he restarted work on it only today."

It was my turn to be shocked. "That's an unthinkable thought, too," I said.

**I** was right about the rain. I woke to the sound of it drumming on the roof, and though it was only six

o'clock and a Sunday, I got up and started preparing some breakfast. I knew George would be itching to get on the road. "The police will be badgering her, and she'll need a lawyer."

"Somebody to hold her hand, more likely!"

The idea of George in love was going to take some getting used to.

Personally I wasn't worried about the lady—people don't go murdering their husbands just to save going through divorce proceedings. My worry was Gideon. I hoped fervently that he had stayed on his farm on Friday and not driven in to Cape Town. The rain stopped about ten and I figured it wasn't too early for calling, so I went out to the back *stoep* and donned my water boots and set out through the nicely soaked orchards to Gideon's place. Steve, my black cocker spaniel, ran hither and thither, sniffing secret scents. The orchards had been disced and sowed with lupins, and the mud was plentiful. When we got near, I saw several cars parked in the driveway. Friends, I supposed, still offering condolences about his father or parading their eligible daughters. After all, who but George would have seen the item in last night's paper? Or, having seen it, made the

connection? It didn't seem a good time for me to be sticking my oar in, so it was about-turn. I got to the dry yard in time to stop Hendrik and Piet from stacking the trays out, so my journey wasn't wasted. I smelled more rain in the air. Steve had had a wonderful time and was covered in mud. I called him to the back yard intending to hose him clean and towel him down, but he divined my intentions and ran off. I hosed my boots clean instead, left them on the porch, and went in to find the wretched dog rolling himself dry on Mary's new Persian (style) rug. The front door was wide open. I chased poor Steve out and slammed the door. Letty was furious. "Well," I said, "you shouldn't have left the front door open."

"I didn't leave it open, master, I shut it."

"Now what will meddem say?" I teased.

"I did shut the door, master," she grumbled.

"Never mind, hang it in the garage to dry and then brush the mud off." That sweetened the atmosphere.

I was dying to make sure that Gid had been on his farm on Friday, but I was sure there would be even more visitors in the afternoon. So I took Steve for a bit of a ramble and got

him washed and dried, read a whodunit, played some records, and managed to keep out of Gid's hair until half past ten next morning.

I found him in a state of distress and in need of a shoulder to cry on. The police had been to see him. Two of them. They had told him that a Mr. F. C. du Toit had been found dead in his flat, and they had found a letter with a name and address on the back. Mr. D. du Toit, Sonskyn, P. A. Hamlet. Inside was a letter signed "Vader." Could they please see Mr. D. du Toit? When Gid told them his father had been killed three weeks ago, they raised their eyebrows and asked him where he was on Friday.

"You were here, weren't you?"

"No, Bill, I was in Cape Town." My heart sank. "I went to see Mr. Jarvis about buying the farm for myself. I was with him until one o'clock. He was very patient with me, explaining how impossible it would be and telling me not to be silly about contesting the will. I suppose he's right. It doesn't seem fair. But I didn't make a decision. I went to the Waldorf for lunch. I ate slowly, not knowing what I should do. In the end I decided I'd better go and have it out with Clive. I didn't want to—I've never liked

him, he's four years older than me, and he always bullied me and put me in the wrong, but there seemed nothing else I could do. I knew where he lived, it's a big block of flats at the top end of Strand Street. He's on the fifth floor. I knocked on the door several times, but there was no reply. I felt relieved and drove home."

"Did you tell the police all this?"

"No, Bill, d'you think I should have? It seemed to me that if they knew I'd been to his flat they'd say I killed him, so I just told them about Mr. Jarvis and the Waldorf. Said I'd been window shopping for an hour or so, then drove home."

"I think I'd have done the same. Did anybody see you at the flats?"

"I didn't see anybody about except when I stepped out of the lift. There was a young lady waiting to get in. A pretty girl—we exchanged smiles, and I held the door open for her."

"A pity, but the chances of the police finding her and her identifying you are about nil, I should think. And was that the end of the interview?"

"Not quite. They asked if I could help them by telling them where they could get in touch with Clive's wife."

"Do you know where she lives?"

"I told them that as far as I knew he wasn't married."

I must have groaned out loud.

"What's the matter? What should I have said? He wasn't married, was he?"

"Oh, Gid, you do have the most infernal luck. It turns out he was married. George Rawlins, who was with me on Saturday, knows her. She hasn't lived with Clive for years. He told me about her when we read about Clive's suicide in the *Argus*."

Gideon pondered this for a while. "Oh, hell," he said, "what a mess. I can see what the police will think now. They'll think I killed him to get the farm, but if I'd known he was married, I wouldn't have had such a strong motive."

I thought the same.

"What shall I do now? Go and tell them everything? Even what I haven't told you?"

"What's that?"

"When I got to the flat, I knocked softly at first and then hard. I tried the handle. The door wasn't locked, so I went in. He was lying naked on the floor with a dagger in his heart. I took one look and backed out quickly. I closed the door softly and came away as calmly as I could. I knew I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I've tried to forget it happened."

Oh, hell, what do I do now?"

"You do what you think best. If the police come again, you'd better tell them the whole story. In the meantime, sit tight and see what happens. I'll go to Cape Town tomorrow and see if George can help us—he's a lawyer."

"Thanks, Bill, you're a tower of strength."

"I don't know about that. But if it's any consolation, you'll be able to contest the will with a clean conscience."

"If I'm not swinging from a rope."

I laughed and slapped him on the back. "Cheer up, lad, you didn't do any of the terrible things you think the cops think you did."

"No, but I could have."

"No, you couldn't, so cheer up. It'll all work out well for you."

I had just finished lunch when the telephone rang my ring—a short and two longs. It was George. Bill, he said, Auntie Frieda is very ill, she may be dying. Is she in the hospital? No, she's at home. I'll come as soon as I can. Good, and she'd like you to bring a photo or two. I'll see what I can find. I rang off. One of the joys of country living in those days was the party line. Ten phones on a line, all of which rang

when the girl at the exchange put through a call. Each subscriber had his own ring but... well, it would be interesting to see who inquired after Auntie Frieda in the next couple of weeks.

I found Flip and put the running of the farm in his care for a few days. He was the nearest I had to a foreman, a good man who deserved a better deal from life. Then I dug out Letty and put her in charge of the house, the dog, the cats, and the hens. I found a few snaps with Gideon in them and had the car pointing south, all before two o'clock. The rain persisted in the mountains and there were probably spectacular waterfalls in the passes, but my mind wasn't on the scenery. I was pushing the old Oxford as hard as I dared. The wet roads took all my attention and slowed me down, so it was just on four when I reached George's office.

He was busy with a client, and I had a ten minute wait. I started thinking about Gideon. I had a sudden uneasy feeling. He'd said he could have done the murder, and I'd dismissed the idea as nonsense. He was the mildest of easygoing young fellows, but on rare occasions, when one of his laborers did something excessively stupid and expensive, he would fly

into a rage, shout at the fool, and throw his hat on the ground and stamp on it in frustration. I don't think he actually trod on it, he was too canny for that, but he'd stamp all round it until suddenly the devil would leave him and he'd pick up his hat, shrug his shoulders, and walk away, leaving the cause of the outburst wondering what had hit him or rather why nothing had hit him. Gid never struck anyone. But I had a sudden mental picture of him pushing the door of Clive's flat open, seeing his brother asleep on the floor with only a towel around his waist, and uncontrollable anger at Clive's rottenness rising in him. Of his reaching for his hat but no hat there, instead a dagger on a coffee table . . . could a man commit a murder in a rage and remember nothing about it afterwards? Or did he remember? Was he the innocent I thought he was, or was he devilish cunning? Had a resentment of his brother's treatment of him over the years built up in him and brought him to this? I shuddered.

George took me to a noisy little cafe where we could talk over a cup of tea without interruption. I told him about my visit to Gid that morning, and he told me about his visit to Jean. He'd driven right over

Bain's Kloof and was approaching Wellington when he realized he didn't know where Jean lived.

"I thought you two were buddies."

"I told you—she's an old friend. I only bumped into her a week ago in Sanderson's office. I haven't got round to dating her yet."

I looked at him and grinned. He grinned back and said nothing. It was obvious he was smitten, and I was glad—he'd been a bachelor too long. "Anyway, then you phoned her."

"There are three pages—twelve columns—of Du Toits in the phone book, and half of them are J's."

"So?"

"So I decided to be patient and went for a long walk on the mountain. It wasn't a bad day here. Then this morning, as soon as I could decently escape from my office, I went round to hers. The great man himself, J. Winston Sanderson, was on his way out. 'Morning, Rawlins,' he said, 'looking for me?' That 'Rawlins' got my goat—patronizing twerp. 'Not unless you're in need of a good criminal lawyer, Mr. Sanderson,' I said. That annoyed him, but he controlled his temper nicely; I guess he's a civilized man under his pomposity. 'And why do you think I should need such

a thing?" 'I've no idea, but you company jugglers are bound to need one sooner or later.' He was too good for me. 'Surely not if we employ good *civil* lawyers?' 'Touché,' I laughed, 'but jokes aside, I wonder if I could speak to Mrs. du Toit?' He said she wasn't feeling well and he'd given her the day off. He gave me her address, and I drove out to Mobray and knocked on her door.

"She was a while coming. Putting on her gown and running a comb through her hair I thought, but when she opened the door, she was fully dressed and looking lovely. She greeted me warmly, said I always popped up in her hour of need. I complimented her on her healthy appearance and told her she'd better not let old Winnie the Pooh see her looking so healthy. But it seems it was he who had phoned her and told her to take the day off."

"Considerate boss," I said.

"Very. Would you believe that as I was getting into my car I saw J.W.S. heading for her flat bearing what looked like a cake in a cakebox?"

"There aren't many like him about," I acknowledged.

George had spent an hour with her, and she'd cried on his shoulder (metaphorically, according to him). She was in trouble, all right. After hearing

nothing from Francois Clive for nearly five years, she'd had a letter last Thursday stating that he was going to sue for divorce on the grounds of adultery and citing J. Winston as co-respondent. This came as a shock, especially as there was "nothing like that" between her and her boss, who was a married man with a nice wife and two little boys. But there had been times when she'd stayed late at the office dealing with urgent correspondence and Winston had insisted on driving her home. Sometimes he came in and had a cup of coffee. She told him it would save him the trouble of taking her home if she took the work home and typed it there. That idea suited his nibs, and several times over a period of months she took a batch of typing home with her.

"Sounds perfectly harmless."

"Yes," said George, "but . . ."

But the week before last, Sanderson Enterprises had been engaged in some takeover skulduggery or whatever that had put a lot of extra work on the willing slave. She'd gone home with a pile of typing, and J. Winston had gone to a council meeting. A little after ten he'd knocked on her door. He'd had some new ideas and wanted to make a lot of alterations. They'd worked inten-

sively until well after midnight, by which time they were both about bushed. Jean made some toast and scrambled a couple of eggs, which they ate at the table, and then they sat in easy chairs to drink tea. He'd fallen asleep, and she was too tired to wake him and dozed off herself. She woke shortly after five A.M. and he was still there, snoring softly. She shook him awake, and they joked about it—what would people say? Especially as Laura was visiting her mother in Durban.

And then the letter. She was furious. Clive must have been spying on her. It didn't matter to her, but it would ruin Winston's political career. She didn't know what to do. Clive could just as easily divorce her on grounds of desertion, but no, he had to do something sneaky. She was due an afternoon off the next day, so she decided to go and have it out with him.

She went to the flat about two thirty, knocked on the door, and got no reply. She looked in her bag for the key she thought she still had but couldn't find it. She tried the door, as one does, and to her surprise it opened. Not like Clive, she thought, to leave his door unlocked. She stepped inside.

"You know what she saw," said George.

Yes indeed. So she came out quickly, closed the door, and hightailed it for the lift. Did anybody see her?"

"Not coming out, but a young man stepped out of the lift as she was going in. A nice young man who smiled and held the lift door open for her."

"Doesn't it hold itself open?"

"Of course—perhaps he wasn't used to lifts."

"How much did Jean tell the police—if they've been around?"

"Oh, they've been around all right. It took them until Sunday to find her, then they came ostensibly to tell her her husband was dead. But they soon got around to where was she on Friday? She didn't know what to say. She had to account for Friday afternoon, so she thought it best to tell the truth."

"The whole truth?"

"Well, not quite whole. She didn't want her boss to get drawn into the mess, so she told them she had gone to see Clive about getting a divorce, but she had had no reply when she knocked so she'd come away and gone shopping."

"Wise girl, that's what Gid should have said. And now what?"

"Now we are going to see my friend Inspector Vos and try to find out when the murder was



committed so that our respective protégés may perhaps be let off the hook."

**G**eorge had made an appointment, and the desk sergeant showed us in. The inspector was a heavily built man in his early fifties with lively brown eyes.

"Well, George," he said after introductions, "in what way can I help you?"

"Bill and I both have an interest in the du Toit murder."

"I thought it was suicide—that's what the papers said."

"Come off it, Nick, why would a man who has just inherited a valuable farm kill himself? And if you really thought it was suicide, why would you be so interested in where people were Friday?"

"What people?" asked the inspector innocently.

"Clive's brother and Mrs. Jean du Toit."

"Ah yes, those people. Mr. Tovey's friend and neighbor and your little friend, shall we say. You are right, of course, we don't believe it was suicide, that was just a ploy to keep the press off our backs while we start looking around, *ne?*"

"For somebody with motive and opportunity."

"You've been studying the detective's vade mecum. We'll

have you in the force yet."

George ignored this quip. "What we want to know is when the—er—death occurred so that our friends can stop worrying."

"Why would they worry if they didn't do it?"

"Gideon," I said, "worries because Lord knows he had motive enough and the bad luck to be in Cape Town that day. He told me he was actually going to see his brother but funk'd it, and he's bright enough to realize that he may not be believed."

"That's true," said Vos, "that's the same story he told my man. Funny thing, though, he didn't really have a motive because his brother was married, only he didn't know it. Whereas your little friend, George, had a very strong motive."

"Saving the trouble and expense of a divorce is hardly a motive for murder."

"Oh, come now, George—a farm worth what? Sixty thousand pounds? Plus maybe ten thousand in the bank? Plus a free divorce? Motive enough for most people."

"But she didn't know about the inheritance, she didn't even know she had any in-laws."

"Ah, well . . ."

"You mean I may believe that story, but thousands

wouldn't." George was unhappy.

"In my job—" Inspector Vos lit the pipe he'd been stoking, leaned back in his chair, and blew a very satisfactory cloud of blue smoke "—one gets the feel for when suspects are telling the truth."

"And you think Jean's not been truthful?"

"In the main, yes, she has, but not in the detail."

"And what about Gideon?" I asked quickly, before George could say something he might regret. "He's about as straightforward as anybody I've ever met."

"Smitty, who spoke to him and who's nobody's fool, says he's definitely lying."

"Then why haven't you brought him in?"

"What's the hurry? We don't arrest people on suspicion, and nobody is pressing for an arrest. As far as I'm aware, there isn't anybody particularly upset at the victim's passing. Look, I'll make a bargain with you. F. C. du Toit is a puzzling figure. I need to know more about his background. Your little friend, George, was married to him for six months—she'll tell you more about him than she'll tell me. And your neighbor, Mr. Tovey, must know more about his brother than he's come out with so far. You

give me a hand with this, and I'll put you in the picture."

We agreed readily, and the inspector described the scene in the flat almost exactly as Jean and Gideon had done.

"The gas fire was turned on, but the gas had run out—it's a shilling in the slot meter."

"Then," said George, "the mystery is solved. Our man has a busy and perhaps dirty morning in the city, going about his mysterious business. He comes home, showers off the grime, wraps a towel round his waist, lights the gas fire, and lies down on the rug by it. For the moment all is bliss, everything is going his way. He smiles inwardly and then, oh horror, the fire goes out and there's not another shilling in the house. It is more than he can bear. His hand finds the dagger on the coffee table. He places the point between two ribs where he thinks his heart is and grasps the hilt in both hands. . . . A sudden twitch of his biceps and his misery is over, with very little fuss and very little mess. No?"

"Possible," laughed Vos, "but very, very improbable. Would you like to have a try, Mr. Tovey?"

"Sure. I'll go along with George up to the point where Du Toit is lying contentedly by the fire, perhaps reading a

book. Was there a book?"

"No book, but a racing guide was lying on the floor by his head."

"Good. He gets very drowsy, drops the paper, probably over his eyes, and goes to sleep. Enter villain stealthily. Sees Clive. Sees dagger. Sees heaven-sent opportunity to rid himself of a nuisance. Does so with, as George says, very little fuss and very little mess. Victim jerks just enough to dislodge racing paper from his face. Villain, pleased to see that he has got the right man, searches for and finds whatever it is that would incriminate him and goes quietly away, closing the door behind him. How's that?"

"That's good," said Vos, "now all we have to discover is who the murderer is and how he or she got in. Most likely with a key, I think, because of the lack of any signs of a struggle. Who does that suggest?"

"Gideon," I said, "Jean, or person or persons unknown."

"And that," said George, "just about sums it up and takes us back to the first square. We'd like to help you more, Nick, but you're holding out on us—you haven't told us what you found in the flat, and you haven't told us when the deed was done."

"True, and though I suspect you gents of withholding evi-

dence—you, for example, Mr. Tovey, didn't tell me about your friend's violent temper—I'll tell you all you need to know. The deed was done, according to the medics, between one and three P.M. on Friday, which doesn't help either of your, what shall I call them, clients. As to what we found, and we searched very thoroughly, we found one letter. It was from his father, asking him to postpone a visit on the thirteenth because he and Gideon would both be working on the dam. That gave us the clue as to where to find his family."

"The thirteenth was the day his father had the accident. I wonder why he kept that letter?"

"Interesting, eh?"

George was getting impatient. "Is that all?"

"Apart from some receipted bills for rent and electricity, and eighteen five pound notes under some clothes in a drawer and twenty-one pounds odd in his suit. Oh, and six loose shillings in a little jar on the coffee table."

"Bang goes my theory," said George. "It really is odd. How did he make his living? Can one really make a living from the gee-gees?"

"We're looking into that, but it's not easy. Betting on the tote is anonymous." Vos looked at

his watch. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do. I've enjoyed our chat, but I must leave you to do your theorizing on your own."

"It's been good of you to give us so much time, especially as we don't seem to have told you anything you didn't know already. Thank you, Nick."

"I'm impressed with your efficiency," I said. "Could we possibly see the flat for ourselves?"

"I could take you tomorrow afternoon."

"Not tonight?"

"Not a chance."

"Could you lend us the key, and we'll go on our own?"

"That would be more than my job's worth."

"Just one thing more—Gideon has spoken of his brother as being a captain in the army. George says he was wearing an Air Force officer's uniform when he was married."

"That's the sort of thing I need more of—gives some insight into his character. Actually, I've checked on that. He was in neither, except maybe in his imagination."

"Come on, George, we can't tell this bloke anything—he's much too smart for us!"

That left the inspector in a good mood.

"What now? Dinner?" said George when we reached my car.

"Bit early, isn't it? How about a sundowner with your little friend. I do like the inspector's name for her."

"Do you. Well, why not? I know you're bursting to meet her."

"Sure am. And to show her some snaps and ask one or two questions."

Fifteen minutes later we were sipping sherry. I could understand George's infatuation. I couldn't understand her remaining unattached for so long.

"Bill's brought some snaps he thought you might like to see."

She must have thought me mad but was too polite to show it. "That's nice," she said.

I handed her one. "That's our local cricket team."

She gave it a casual glance and then froze. "That's the man I met coming out of Clive's building."

"I thought it might be, that's why I brought it along. He's my neighbor and a good friend and, incidentally, your brother-in-law."

"I've got a brother-in-law? Clive told me he was an orphan and an only child. What was he up to?"

"No good," said George, "that seems certain. Haven't you really any idea? It would help the police a lot if they knew what sort of racket he was in."

But she didn't know. She knew he wasn't what he pretended to be, and she'd left him before she could get involved. Suddenly a thought struck her. "My brother-in-law—he looks nice—but it must have been him."

"Was he wearing a hat?" I asked.

"That's a funny question! But no, I'm sure he wasn't. Does it matter?"

"He asks a lot of funny questions," said George.

I got a sudden mental picture of a muddy spaniel rolling on the rug and Letty saying, "I did shut the door." I felt quite excited. "What's the best way to get mud off a rug?" I asked.

Jean's eyebrows went up, and George shook his head sadly. I needed to know one more thing and then, if the answer was what I suspected it might be, we'd be well on the way to solving the problem. But I didn't know how to broach the subject.

George came to the rescue. "Actually, Bill doesn't think his friend committed the murder. He thinks you did it. Just joking!"

"I should hope so!"

"Mind you," he gave her a sly look, "the police aren't as sure of your innocence as I am. They think you didn't tell them the unbridled truth."

"About the key," I said.

"I did tell the truth—I said I'd lost it, and I had. I told George I thought it was still in my handbag, but when I looked for it, I couldn't find it."

"Ah..."

"What do you mean, ah?"

"Mary's bag collects so many odds and ends that she often has trouble finding the item she wants."

"Are you suggesting... here, look for yourself."

"Oh, I wouldn't presume."

"Let's show this smart aleck, shall we?" George reached for the bag and began rummaging in it. He fished out a key ring of keys.

"This flat, office, filing cabinets."

"And this one?"

She went white. "Where did you get that?"

"In your bag."

"Don't worry about it," I said, "It happens all the time."

"But the police—oh dear, what will they think?"

"The worst," said George, "so I'd advise you to stick to your story. Get rid of it, but before you flush it down the toilet, may we borrow it? We want to have a look round Clive's flat by ourselves, but Inspector Vos won't let us."

"What," asked George when we were in my car again, "has

mud on a rug got to do with the price of eggs?" I told him the whole story of Steve's misdeemeanor. He was still mystified. "The point is," I explained, "Letty did shut the door, but it's slightly warped and she didn't shut it firmly enough for the latch to click home. Steve was able to push it open."

"Good for Steve," he said eventually, "he's put a lot of pieces in place for us. Scenario now reads, villain, unknown, arrives at flat at about two fifteen, knocks on door—no reply—splendid, he's out. Unlocks door and goes in to remove incriminating evidence. Finds the—blackmailer, I'm convinced—asleep on floor and dagger at hand, et cetera, et cetera. Searches for and finds documents and probably Clive's gun and goes off with them, closing the door softly, not realizing that the latch wasn't quite home. Two thirty, Gideon arrives and performs his act as he told you. Closes door gently. Two thirty-three, Jean ditto, but she is familiar with the door's habits and pulls the handle firmly. How's that?"

"Spot on except that the villain isn't unknown any more, is he?"

"You mean who could have a key?"

"Taken it Friday and put it back today."

"I think you're probably right," said George, "but how do we prove it?"

"There's a strong possibility that you have one thing wrong in your analysis. I like the thought about the gun—I felt sure Clive would have one, but Vos's men didn't find it. But I don't think our man found what he was looking for."

The flat was much as described. The coffee table was there minus the dagger and the money jar. It had clearly been dusted for fingerprints. The rug that F. C. had been lying on had been removed. We glanced into the desk drawers, but they'd been emptied. There was no place in that room where he could have hidden the smallest thing. The walls were plastered brick, and the floor was parquet—three by nine inch blocks of Rhodesian teak laid on concrete. The bathroom and kitchen had more possibilities with their cupboards, or perhaps we could find a loose tile? We couldn't. That left the bedroom—a bed, a dressing table, and a built-in wardrobe. The bed was made and his clothes were in place in the wardrobe, but no doubt the police had been through all that. A very thorough search, Vos had said.

We sat on the bed and pon-

dered. "What exactly are we looking for?"

"What indeed," said George. "Anything left lying about or incriminating the cops will have removed, so . . ."

"So?"

"So we must look for something that doesn't fit the pattern, something out of character."

On impulse I got up and opened the wardrobe doors again. On the back of one door was a neat chrome rail with half a dozen ties hanging from it. On the other, two small screw eyes were screwed in and a piece of string tied between. "I wonder what that's for—there's still space on the other rail. Or this tin of floor polish and a polishing rag. Do the tenants polish their own floors?"

"Hardly likely. I'm sure his nibs wouldn't."

"That's it, then, it's under the floor."

"But it's concrete."

"Even concrete can be chipped away."

"With a pneumatic drill."

"Or a hammer and chisel and a lot of patience."

"Let's find it then."

We went into the living room. There was a large concrete beam crossing the middle of the ceiling. It was obvious that there would be a similar one under the floor. The con-

crete would be at least fifteen inches deep—not much danger of any chipping disturbing the plaster on the ceiling of the flat below. Under the beam was the place to look. Tapping the blocks with our knuckles yielded nothing, but George's eagle eyes spotted a block with two tiny polish-filled holes in it. The two eyelets with their string fitted into the holes as if the device had been made for that particular job. I scraped some excess polish from around the block, yanked the string, and out it came. The two blocks next to it came out easily, and there was the cache.

He had cut a hole down to where the steel mesh of the floor got in his way. About three inches deep it was, five inches wide and ten inches long. He must have had blisters by the time he finished it, but it was dead right for holding a stack of long envelopes. The top one was labeled "Sanderson."

"Don't touch anything," said George, "this is where Vos takes over."

Trust a blackmailer not to have a phone. George went off to get the inspector while I stayed on guard. On guard against what? Did we expect the murderer to return to find whatever it was that would incriminate him? He might well do that. Until he had it, he



would be on the hook. Don't be long, George. I turned out the light and sat in one of the easy chairs. If he did come and found the light on, he would go away again. Who would it be? We had concluded that it would be Sanderson, but did he really have a motive for murder? If Clive had demanded money to keep quiet about the night at Jean's flat, he could have gone to the police and had Clive run out of town. Was he the only one who could lay his hand on a key? There could have been others—"business associates" with things to hide who frequented his office. Somebody could have got a copy of the key from the caretaker or cleaners. The owner of the building? So many possibilities. Sanderson seemed to be a decent, public-spirited man, and a black-mailer has so many enemies. I heard a key being inserted in the lock, and the hair on the back of my neck bristled. Where are you, George? In the dim light I saw a figure standing in the doorway. A torch flashed on its beam might have swept the room and found me sitting there, but it shone onto the open cache. With a strangled cry the man fell on his knees by the hole and riffled through the envelopes, selected one, stuffed it in his pocket, stood up, turned, and made for

the door before I could properly gather my wits. I didn't stop to think that I weighed a hundred and thirty pounds and he was near two hundred. I leapt out of my chair and performed what I thought was a rugby tackle on his knees. He crashed down and so did I, but we were both up in a flash. He threw a vicious blow to where he thought my head was, but luckily it wasn't. I jumped out of his way and grabbed a dining room chair by the legs. At the same instant he switched on the light and I saw the gun in his hand—a small chromium-plated thing, probably Clive's. It didn't look too dangerous except at close range. Which is where I was. He stood there, slightly bemused, pointing the gun at me. I had the advantage of surprise, and I wasn't going to lose it. "Get him, George," I shouted, looking over his shoulder. He couldn't resist glancing behind, and in that instant I brought the back of the chair down smartly on his forearm. He screamed, the gun went off and went skidding along the floor. I had it before he could move. "Now you put your hands up over your head."

He looked at me stupidly. "Who the hell are you?" he said. "You've broken my arm and shot me in the foot." I saw that the bullet had indeed pene-

trated his instep. He must have been in shocking pain.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be so rough. See if you can hobble to this nice chair and sit down while we wait for the police."

"Give me a hand, will you?"

But I wasn't falling for that one. I pushed a chair nearer to him, and he more or less fell into it. I placed another opposite him a few feet away and waited for Vos to come. I kept the gun at the ready, but Sanderson was about done in with pain. I felt sorry for him—he had rid the world of a rotten nuisance and should have got a medal for it. But he wouldn't. On the other hand, he tried to put the blame on Jean, and that I couldn't take.

And that's really the end of the story. George and Inspector Vos arrived and tidied things up. And it all ended happily ever after.

You want to know how? Devils for punishment, aren't you?

Well, then. The police ripped up that floor and found two more caches, each filled to the brim with high denomination

notes. After due period when nobody lodged any claim against Clive's estate, they were handed over to his legal wife, and there were so many of them that when George married her soon after, he was able to claim he married her for her money. The courts declared Du Toit Senior's will null and void, and Gideon inherited the farm and enough money to pay the death duties. So far he's been able to keep well clear of the bankruptcy court.

There was a lot of sympathy for poor old Winston Sanderson. He had only pinched Jean's key in order to commit burglary, but somehow things had got out of hand. The jury was particularly sympathetic, especially after the police had been able to show that Clive had murdered his father. The judge gave him the minimum possible sentence (one law for the rich?), and after a few years he was free and able to move his family and business to Johannesburg. He gave up his political ambitions.

And as for me, I went home, gave Steve a big hug and a special bone to chew on, and waited for Mary to come home.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Ghost of the Count

Anonymous



Not far from the Alameda, in the City of Mexico, there is a great old stone building, in which once lived a very wealthy and wicked Spanish count. The house has about four floors, and ninety rooms, more or less. The entire fourth floor is rented and occupied by a big American firm, and their book-keeper, an American girl, has given us the following true account of the ghost that for years haunted the building. The second floor is unoccupied, as no one cares to live there for obvious reasons. And the bottom floor is also unoccupied, save for lumber rooms, empty boxes and crates and barrels. And last of all is the great patio with its tiled floor, where secretly in the night a duel was fought to the death by the wicked count and a famous Austrian prince, who was one of Maximilian's men. The count was killed.

No one knows why the duel was fought; some say it was because of a beautiful Spanish woman; some say that it was because of treasure that the two jointly "conveyed," and which the count refused to divide with his princely "*socio*," and more people—Mexicans—shrug their shoulders if you ask about it and say, "*Quien sabe?*"

"I saw a ghost here last night, Miss James," announces our cashier with much *éclat* and evident pride.

So great is the shock that I gasp and my pen drops, spattering red ink on my nice fresh cuffs, and (worse luck!) on the ledger page that I had just totted up. It is ruined, and I will have to erase it, or—something! Wretched man!

"I wish to goodness it had taken you off," I cry wrathfully as I look at the bespattered work. "Now, will you just look here and see what you have done? I wish you and your ghosts were in—"

"Gehenna?" he inquires sweetly; "I'll fix that—it won't take half a minute. And don't look so stern, else I won't tell you about the *espanto*. And you will be sorry if you don't hear about it—it would make such a good story." (Insinuatingly.)

"Then go ahead with it." (Ungraciously.)

"Well, last night I was waiting for West. He was to meet me here, after which it was our intention to hit the—that is, I mean we were going out together." (I nod scornfully.) "And it seems that while I was patiently waiting here, in my usual sweet-tempered way, the blank idiot had his supper and then lay down to rest himself for awhile. You know how delicate he is?" (Another contemptuous nod.) "Unfortunately he forgot the engagement and slept on. He says he never awoke until three o'clock, and so didn't

come, thinking I wouldn't be there. Meantime I also went to sleep and might have snoozed on until three likewise but for the fact that the ghost woke me—

"Well? Do go on," I urge.

"The ghost woke me, as I said," proceeds the simpleton, slowly. "It was passing its cold fingers over my face and groaning. Really, it was most extraordinary. At first I didn't know what it was; then, as I felt the icy fingers stroking my face and heard bloodcurdling groans issuing from the darkness, I knew what it was. And I remembered the story of the prince and his little duel down in the patio, and knew it was the ghost of the prince's victim. By the way, you don't know what a funny sensation it is to have a ghost pat your face, Miss James—"

"Pat nothing," I retort indignantly. "I wonder you are not ashamed to tell me such fibs. Such a ta-ra-diddle! And as for the man that the prince killed downstairs, you know as well as I do that he was taken home to Spain and buried there. Why, then, should he come back here into our offices, and pat your face?"

"Ah, that I can't say," with a supercilious drawl. "I can only account for it by thinking that the ghost has good taste—better than that of some people I know," meaningly. "But honestly, I swear that I am telling you the truth—cross my heart and hope to die if I am not! And you don't know how brave I was—I never screamed; in fact, I never made a sound; oh, I was brave!"

"Then what did you do?" sternly.

"I ran. *Por Dios*, how I ran! You remember with what alacrity we got down the stairs during the November earthquake?" (I remember only too distinctly.) "Well, last night's run wasn't a run, in comparison—it was a disappearance, a flight, a sprint! I went down the four flights of stairs like a streak of blue lightning, and the ghost flew with me. I heard the pattering of its steps and its groans clean down to the patio door, and I assure you I quite thought I had made such an impression that it was actually going on home with me. And the thought made me feel so weak that I felt perforce obliged to take a—have a—that is, strengthen myself with a cocktail. After which I felt stronger and went home quite peacefully. But it was an uncanny experience, wasn't it?"

"Was it before or after taking that cocktail?" I ask incredulously. "And did you take one only or eleven?"

I am hard on the man, but he really deserves it. Ghosts! Spirits, perhaps, but not ghosts. Whereat his feelings are quite

"hurted"—and so much so that he vows he will never tell me anything again; I had better read about Doubting Thomas; he never has seen such an unbelieving woman in all his life, and if I were only a man he would be tempted to pray that I might see the ghost; it would serve me right. Then wrathfully departs, to notice me no more that day.

Not believing the least bit in ghosts, I gave the matter no more thought. In fact, when you fall heir to a set of books that haven't been posted for nineteen days, and you have to do it all, and get up your trial balance, too, or else give up your Christmas holidays, you haven't much time to think about ghosts or anything else, except entries. And though I had been working fourteen hours per day, the twenty-fourth of December, noon hour, found me with a difference of thirteen dollars and eighty-nine cents. The which I, of course, must locate and straighten out before departing next morning on my week's holiday. *Por supuesto*, it meant night work. Nothing else would do, and besides, our plans had all been made to leave on the eight o'clock train next morning. So I would just sit up all night, if need be, and find the wretched balance and be done with it.

Behold me settled for work that night at seven o'clock in my own office, with three lamps burning to keep it from looking dismal and lonely and books and ledgers and journals piled up two feet high around me. If hard work would locate that nasty, hateful thirteen eighty-nine, it would surely be found. I had told the *portero* downstairs on the ground floor to try to keep awake for a time, but if I didn't soon finish the work, I would come down and call him when I was ready to go home.

He lived in a little room, all shut off from the rest of the building, so that it was rather difficult to get at him. Besides, he was the very laziest and sleepest peon possible, and though he was supposed to take care of the big building at night, patrolling it so as to keep off *ladrones*, he in reality slept so soundly that the last trumpet, much less Mexican robbers, would not have roused him.

And for this very reason, before settling to my work, I was careful to go around and look to locks and bolts myself; everything was secure, and the doors safely fastened. So that if *ladrones* did break through, they would have to be in shape to pass through keyholes or possess false keys.

With never a thought of spirits or *porteros* or anything else beyond the thirteen dollars and eighty-nine cents, I worked and

added and re-added and footed up. And at eleven o'clock, *gracias a Dios*, I had the thirteen dollars all safe, and would have whooped for joy, had I the time. However, I wasn't out of the woods yet, the sum of eighty-nine dollars being often more easy of location than eighty-nine cents. The latter must be found, also, before I could have the pleasure of shouting in celebration thereof.

At it I went again. After brain cudgeling and more adding and prayerful thought I at last had under my thumb that abominable eighty cents. Eureka! Only nine cents out. I could get it all straight and have some sleep, after all! Inspired by which thought I smothered my yawns and again began to add. I looked at my watch—ten minutes to twelve. Perhaps I could get it fixed before one.

I suppose I had worked at the nine cents for about twenty minutes. One of the cash entries looked to me to be in error. I compared it with the voucher—yes, that was just where the trouble lay! Eleven cents—ten—nine—

S-t-t! Out went the lights in the twinkling of an eye—as I sat, gaping in my astonishment, from out of the pitchy darkness of the room came the most dreary, horrible, bloodcurdling groan imaginable. As I sat paralyzed, not daring to breathe, doubting my senses for a moment, and then thinking indignantly that it was some trick of that wretched cashier, I felt long, thin, icy fingers passing gently over my face. *Malgame Dios!* what a sensation! At first I was afraid to move. Then I nervously tried to brush the icy, bony things away. As fast as I brushed, with my heart beating like a steam hammer, and gasping with deadly fear, the fingers would come back again; a cold wind was blowing over me. Again came that dreadful groan, and too frightened to move or scream, I tumbled in a heap on the floor, among the books and ledgers. Then I suppose I fainted.

When I regained my senses I was still in a heap with the ledgers; still it was dark, and still I felt the cold fingers caressing my face. At which I became thoroughly desperate. No ghost should own me! I had laughed at the poor cashier and hinted darkly at cocktails. Pray, what better was I?

I scrambled to my feet, the fingers still stroking my face. I must address them—what language—did they understand English or Spanish, I wondered. Spanish would doubtless be most suitable, if indeed, it was the ghost of the murdered count—

"Will you do me the favor, Señor Ghost," I started out bravely, in my best Spanish, but with a trembling voice, "to inform me what



it is that you desire? Is there anything I can do for you? Because if not, I would like very much to be allowed to finish my work, which I cannot do (if you will pardon my abruptness) if I am not alone."

(Being the ghost of a gentleman and a diplomat, surely he would take the hint and vanish. *Ojala!*)

Perhaps the ghost did not understand my Spanish; at any rate there was no articulate reply; there was another groan—again the fingers touched me, and then there was such a mournful sigh that I felt sorry for the poor thing—what could be the matter with it? With my pity, all fear was lost for a moment, and I said to the darkness all about me:

"What is it that you wish, *pobre señor*? Can I not aid you? I am not afraid—let me help you!"

The fingers moved uncertainly for a moment; then the ledgers all fell down with a loud bang; a cold hand caught mine, very gently—I tried not to feel frightened, but it was difficult—and I was led off blindly, through the offices. I could not see a thing—not a glimmer of light showed; not a sound was heard except my own footsteps, and the faint sound of the invisible something that was leading me along—there were no more groans, thank goodness, else I should have shrieked and fainted, without a doubt. Only pattering footsteps and the cold hand that led me on and on.

We—the fingers and I—were somehow in the great hall, then on the second floor, and at last on the stairs, going on down, flight after flight. Then I knew that I was being led about by the fingers on the tiled floor of the patio, and close to the *portero's* lodge. Simpleton that he was! Sleeping like a log, no doubt, while I was being led about in the black darkness by an invisible hand, and no one to save me! I would have yelled, of course, but for one fact—I found it utterly impossible to speak or move my tongue, being a rare and uncomfortable sensation.

But where were we going? Back into the unused lumber rooms, joining onto the patio? Nothing there, except barrels and slabs and empty boxes. What could the ghost mean? He must be utterly demented, surely.

In the middle of the first room we paused. I had an idea of rushing out and screaming for the *portero* but abandoned it when I found that my feet wouldn't go. I heard steps passing to and fro about the floor, and waited, cold and trembling. They approached me; again my hand was taken, and I was led over near the corner of

the room. Obedient to the unseen will, I bent down and groped about the floor, guided by the cold fingers holding mine, until I felt something like a tiny ring, set firmly in the floor. I pulled at it faintly, but it did not move, at which the ghost gave a faint sigh. For a second the cold fingers pressed mine, quite affectionately, then released me, and I heard the steps passing slowly into the patio, then dying away. Where was it going, and what on earth did it all mean?

But I was so tired and wrought up I tried to find the door, but couldn't (the cashier would have been revenged could he have seen me stupidly fumbling at a barrel, thinking it was the door), and at last, too fatigued and sleepy to stand, I dropped down on the cold stone floor and went to sleep.

I must have slept for some hours, for when I awoke the light of dawn was coming in at the window, and I sat up and wondered if I had taken leave of my senses during the night. What on earth could I be doing here in the lumber room? Then, like a flash, I remembered and, half unconsciously, crept about on the floor seeking the small ring. There it was! I caught it and jerked at it hard. Hey, presto, change! For it seemed to me that the entire floor was giving away. There was a sliding, crashing sound, and I found myself hanging on for dear life to a barrel that, fortunately, retained its equilibrium, and with my feet dangling into space. Down below me was a small, stone-floored room, with big boxes and small ones ranged about the walls. Treasure! Like a flash the thought struck me, and with one leap I was down in the secret room gazing about at the boxes.

But, alas! upon investigation, the biggest chests proved empty. The bad, wicked count! No wonder he couldn't rest in his Spanish grave, but must come back to the scene of his wickedness and deceit to make reparation! But the smaller chests were literally crammed with all sorts of things—big heavy Spanish coins, in gold and silver; gold and silver dinner services, with the crest of the unfortunate emperor; magnificent pieces of jeweled armor and weapons; beautiful jewelry and loose precious stones. I deliberately selected handfuls of the latter, giving my preference to the diamonds and pearls—I had always had a taste for them, which I had never before been able to gratify!—and packed them in a wooden box that I found in the lumber room.

The gold and dinner services and armor, etc., I left as they were, being rather cumbersome, and carried off, rejoicing, my big box of

diamonds and pearls and other jewelry.

Needless to say, we didn't go away for the holidays on the eight o'clock train. But I did come down to the office and proceeded to locate my missing nine cents. After which I unfolded the tale of the ghost and the treasure—only keeping quiet the matter of my private loot. Of which I was heartily glad afterwards. For when the government learned of the find, what do you suppose they offered me for going about with the ghost and discovering the secret room and treasure? Ten thousand dollars! When I refused, stating that I would take merely, as my reward, one of the gold dinner services, the greedy things objected at first, but I finally had my way. And to this very day they have no idea that I—even I—have all the beautiful jewels. Wouldn't they be furious if they knew it? But they aren't apt to, unless they learn English and read this story. Which isn't likely.

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### **SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":**

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1. Judge Galloway sentenced Awful Andy, the Horse Thief, to be hanged on Monday in One-Saloon Town.
2. Judge Noosem sentenced Dirty Dan, the Gunfighter, to be hanged on Tuesday in Silver City.
3. Judge Lynch sentenced Crazy Cal, the Train Robber, to be hanged on Wednesday in End of the Road.
4. Judge Swinger sentenced Evil Ernie, the Cattle Rustler, to be hanged on Thursday in Made It Here.
5. Judge Gibbet sentenced Bad Billy, the Barn Burner, to be hanged on Friday in Devil's Own.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



LEONARD TOURNEY

Photo by Don Seban

**L**eonard Tourney did his homework for a class he was teaching on Shakespeare at the University of Tulsa, and when he was finished, he had all this marvelous information about the life and times of the rising middle classes in Elizabethan days. Too much to use in class. What to do? Some would propose a new course. Tourney wrote a mystery novel called *The Player's Boy Is Dead* (Harper & Row, 1980; Ballantine, 1980), with the story set in an inn near Chelmsford, Essex, in the last years of Queen Elizabeth I.

A young maidservant at the Triple Crown Inn, enamored of the boy who took the girl's parts in a traveling troupe of actors, goes to the stable early in the morning to find the boy dead. He was murdered, and the local constable is called to the scene: Matthew Stock, a

clothier with a prosperous trade on High Street, who sings with a clear tenor voice and who accepted the honor of being elected constable only nine months earlier. He is short, thick-set, dark of complexion, in his forties. His wife Joan is industrious, a competent manager who, like her husband, is plump, short, dark, and forty-ish.

Matthew had enjoyed being constable up until now, but never before had the honor of election brought with it such an onerous task. With only three months to go in his term, this murder makes him only too aware of his responsibilities, the hazards accompanying them, and his lack of qualifications to carry them out.

In this novel, we see a little of life among the tradesmen of the town, how class structure still affects Matthew and Joan

when they are invited to dine with the magistrate, how the better classes live and debauch, and something of the lives and techniques of traveling actors. We see a play, Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, in "modern dress" with little in the way of scenery and props; it is not to Matthew's taste—he can still "see" the actors behind the masks—but Joan is enthralled and wants to go up to London to see that new play about a midsummer's night. And we do see London, visit the Globe Theater, and meet Robert Cecil, secretary to Queen Elizabeth in the last six years of her reign.

*The Player's Boy Is Dead* has been followed by five more in the series: *Low Treason* (E. P. Dutton and Ballantine, 1982), *Familiar Spirits* (St. Martin's, 1984; Ballantine, 1989); *The Bartholomew Fair Murders* (St. Martin's, 1986; Ballantine, 1987); *Old Saxon Blood* (St. Martin's, 1988; Ballantine, 1990) and *Knaves Templar* (St. Martin's, 1991). In each, Robert Cecil plays a prominent role—he has become much impressed with the investigative skills of the mild-mannered little clothier from the small village and finds Matthew useful in various situations.

*Low Treason* introduces us to Thomas Ingram, young brother of Matthew's son-in-law.

Thomas has been apprenticed to a renowned jeweler in London, but soon the family is informed that Thomas has run off to sea. Since this behavior is unlike Thomas, Matthew volunteers to go to London to investigate. Meanwhile, Thomas has headed for Chelmsford and has been set upon by thugs. Thomas is running away from the apprenticeship because he has discovered that the jeweler is a blackmailer, engaged in treasonous activities.

*Familiar Spirits* shows the reaction of Chelmsford to a witchcraft trial and a subsequent panic. People in the village turn on each other, accusing those with whom they have had past quarrels or toward whom they hold grudges. We also get some insights into the religious mores of the time (football was forbidden except for Christmas Day, by law) and attend a witchcraft trial, including the investigation of the body of the accused for Satan's mark.

*The Bartholomew Fair Murders* is set at Smithfield, at an annual fair where Matthew displays his cloth. Murder, first of a puppet-master, then of the bear-baiter's assistant, and finally of the bear-baiter, leads Matthew and Joan on a merry chase through the fair, looking for a mad Puritan who sees the devil's mark in all

things gaudy and extravagant.

In *Old Saxon Blood*, Matthew and Joan are sent undercover as steward and housekeeper to a castle in Derbyshire. The lord of the castle, the last male in a line of "old Saxon blood" and a hero in wars against Ireland, has been found upright in a small boat in the middle of his manmade lake, drowned. The local constable declares it death by misadventure, but the man's sole heir, Frances Challoner, lady in waiting to Queen Elizabeth, believes it was murder. After all, what drowned man hauls himself back into a boat to sit upright?

In Tournay's latest, *Knave's Templar*, Matthew and Joan get involved with murders disguised to look like suicide, all among young law students in the Middle Temple. Joan gets more involved than ever, wandering London dressed as a boy and befriending whores and other less than reputable street people while Matthew goes undercover in the Middle Temple. Drugs, blackmail, and revenge are motives, and we get an inside look at law and its practitioners in 1602.

The timing of the series, from sometime in 1601 (if the dating in *The Player's Boy Is Dead* is accurate—eight years after Marlowe's death from a knifing over a bar bill in 1593) to

Christmas of 1602, shows Matthew and Joan in a rapid rise to fame as investigators, even if they aren't properly rewarded with riches or a knighthood. They have made friends with people in power, have traveled the length and breadth of England, and have even seen one of Master Shakespeare's plays (that one about the midsummer's night). They are more in love than ever, and Matthew has even more respect for the intelligence and wit of his beloved Joan.

Perhaps the note on the cover of *Knave's Templar* is accurate ("... Leonard Tournay's last Joan and Matthew Stock mystery of Elizabethan England"). Elizabeth is ill, due to die less than three months from the date of *Knave's Templar*. Cecil is busy establishing the right of succession for James Stewart, and upon Elizabeth's death, Matthew and Joan may retire from detecting. They are content with their lot—Matthew may still be constable, but he prefers his shop and trade in Chelmsford, and Joan prefers her own household with her own pewter and servants she can trust and rely on. A regular reader, however, can only hope that James Stewart recognizes the worth of these two protagonists and continues to avail the Crown of their services well into his reign.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**T**here's little that could present a new mother with greater terror than a serious threat to her family. That is well illustrated in **The Hand That Rocks the Cradle**, a methodically crafted thriller.

In this movie, directed by Curtis (*Bad Influence*) Hanson, we have a happy, successful Seattle family in need of a nanny for a newborn son. Claire Bartel (Annabella Sciorra) is a botanist who has had grand plans to build a greenhouse in her back yard after her son is born. One sunny day, as if out of nowhere, lovely Peyton Flanders (Rebecca De Mornay) steps into the picture, looking for a nanny's position.

To backtrack a little, when she was pregnant, Claire was molested by her doctor during a pelvic exam. After her charges

and those of other women were made public, the doctor committed suicide. Left behind was a widow, herself pregnant, who miscarried after losing her husband.

Although Claire doesn't know it, her new nanny is the new widow, hellbent on revenge. But to Claire, her husband Michael (Matt McCoy), and their little daughter Emma (Madeline Zima), Peyton is a treasure.

While Claire is busy working on her back yard greenhouse, Peyton is busy planting the seeds that will tear the family part. Slowly she ingratiates herself, carefully probing, looking for weak spots.

She becomes Claire's best pal and uses the friendship to convince her that Michael is having an affair with an old friend. She gets closer to Michael by



suggesting a surprise birthday party for Claire. And with her sparkling smile and ethereal blue eyes, she ever so gradually seduces him.

Peyton and young Emma begin to share secrets that only they know. The nanny drives a wedge between mother and daughter when she beats up and threatens a schoolyard bully for Emma after Claire has been unable to stop him from bothering the child.

She even goes so far as to breastfeed the infant in the dark of night (having recently miscarried, she still has milk), turning him away from his real mother's breast. Hard to top that on the evil-meter.

Only one person realizes that Peyton is up to no good—Solomon (Ernie Hudson), the slow-witted handyman for whom the family has great affection. When he accidentally sees Peyton breastfeeding the baby, she threatens him and concocts a trap that gets him banished.

The tension among the characters builds to the breaking point, and break it does.

Claire suffers from asthma brought on by stressful situations, as it happens; Peyton engineers an accident that triggers it after disabling and emptying all Claire's inhalators. When Claire goes to the hospital for a lengthy stay, Peyton makes her move to take

complete control of the family.

Like many recent thrillers, this one winds up with a tremendous chase scene. It's set in the Bartel home, a large white clapboard house, perfectly restored with plenty of rooms. The finale is breathtaking, heart-pounding, and satisfying.

Rebecca De Mornay, in a role that may finally make people stop referring to her as the prostitute who falls for Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*, is positively creepy as the nanny from hell. While appearing sweet to her employers, she also has an oddly icy look. She makes all the right moves to fit in, but just below the surface is something quite sinister. And no one can quite caress a refrigerator door the way she does in one late-night kitchen meeting with the man of the house.

Annabella Sciorra, who plays the hapless dupe of a mother, doesn't rise much above her bland character. Matt McCoy, as the goofy, grinning husband, is even less distinctive. His character has absolutely no depth, and that's how he plays it.

Madeline Zima, as the doe-eyed daughter Emma, is completely adorable. Ernie Hudson (from *Ghostbusters*) is sympathetic as the handyman aptly named Solomon, in a role that evokes Lenny from *Of Mice and Men*.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The May Mysterious Photo-Hewitt Mann of Spencerville, mentions go to D. J. Bart of Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Madera, California; Stuart York; T. J. Bishop of St. Marys, Ontario, Canada; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Pat Healy of Novato, California; and Andy Dequasie of Pownal, Vermont.

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And Mother Earth wept.

Years later, when Mother Earth was finally over her loss (or as close as any mother can *ever* be), killers came into the forest. When silence fell, Animals was gone, leaving only blood-soaked earth for his memorial.

And Mother Earth wept again.

The forest was now silent. No birds sang (for Animals was dead). No bees stroked the blossoms (for Wildflowers was no more). But Trees still stood, tall and silent.

And Mother Earth's sorrow turned to anger. How could Trees stand silent when his brother was dead and his sister facing unspeakable horrors every day? Why did he refuse to bend to his mother and comfort her?

And Mother Earth burst with tears of anger. Lightning flashed, crackling over Trees' head, until suddenly with one ferocious flash Trees was turned into a leafless, blackened skeleton.

Now anger was replaced by horror as Mother Earth saw what she had done. She tore herself, screamed in wild confusion, cursed mankind, and went completely mad.

So they took Mother Earth away, and eventually the forest was sold for back taxes.

To Father Time.

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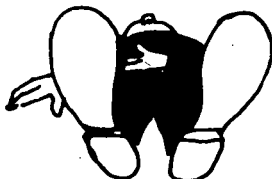
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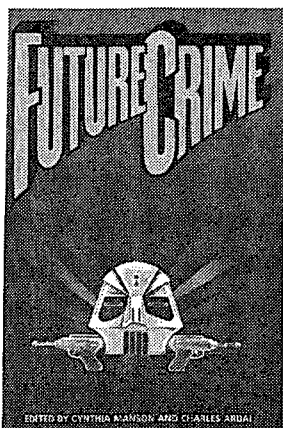
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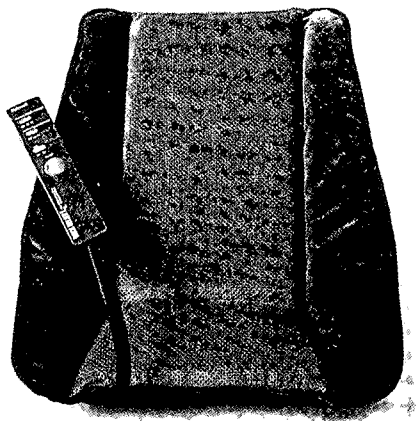
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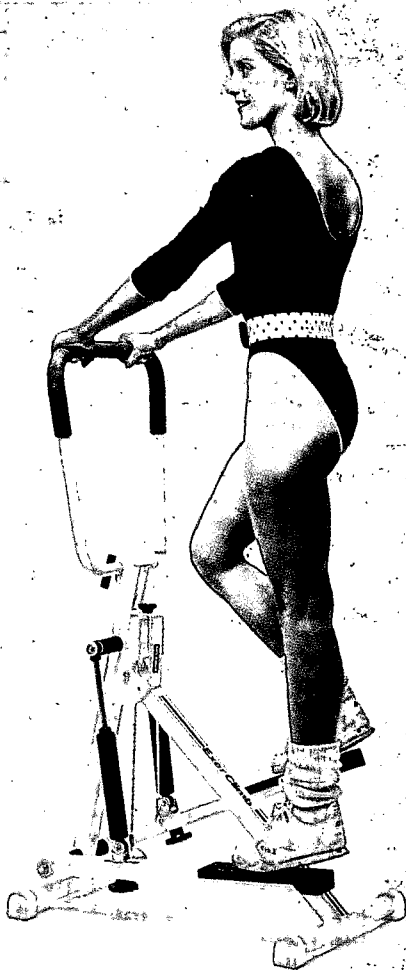
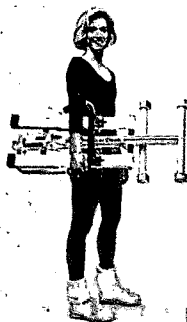
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